
鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI
イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン
凪良 NAGIRYO
ヘヴィオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT
II.III war
一番小さな戦争
電撃文庫

Heavy Object - Volume 12
The Smallest War — *0.01mm War*



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II.III mm 戦争 ―兼ノ宮ナナ戦争―
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結局、戦争はなくならなかった。
でも、変化はあった。
――超大型兵器オブジェクト。
それが、戦争の全てを変えた。

ヘヴィオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT

0.01mm War 一番小さな戦争


HEAVY OBJECT
name/Catherine Blue angel
sex/female
place of birth/Elegance Amazon
age/12
height/138m
weight/31.0kg
body size/64.48.65(cm)
hair color/blond
eye color/green
class/First Lieutenant
belong/on attatchment to 37th E.M.B.
post/cadet of retired officer


クウェンサー
ミリンダ
キャスリン
ヘイウィア
ミルミッシリ
マリーディ
お嬢様

セカンドヴェニス。
当たり前のような顔で
横たわっているように見えるシステムは、本当に安全か？
あるいはそいつは、
壊してこそ安全を得られるかもしれないぞ。

―とある休暇中の傭兵のつぶやき―

HEAVY OBJECT

0.01mm War

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
一番小さな戦争

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

Prologue

Attention all of you who ended up in the army after failing to find a spouse or a job! I am Captain April of the Training Unit and you can think of me as the oh-so-kind goddess who will give you an identity that society will actually accept.

Now, when you heard this was the army, you might have thought you'd be out there firing rifles or missiles, but that isn't all the army does. In fact, everyone hates firefights between flesh and blood soldiers in this clean age of Objects. This boot camp will pound the proper skills and dignity into your heads, but you can assume you'll barely ever get to use them.

The army does a lot of things. You might teach the local youths how to fire a gun to increase the number of fighters, you might take photos for pamphlets to rid countries of their impoverished image and bring in tourists, you might retrieve landmines or unexploded ordnance, you might help film movies, you might help excavate dinosaur fossils, you might build schools or hospitals, you might provide disaster assistance, you might prevent the spread of disease, and the list goes on. Unless things go awry, you might very well find yourself holding a shovel more often than a gun.

This is a peaceful use of an army.

Are you thinking this sounds easy? Or that it isn't as much work as you thought? Be honest and raise your hand…and then I'll let you off with only twenty laps.

This is anything but easy and you will be sorely mistaken if you think it isn't much work. Didn't I tell you? This is the army. Even if it looks like we're doing the same things, we're fundamentally different from the Blue Cross that places their donation boxes next to convenience store cash registers.

This is war.

It may have taken a different form, but it's still war.

Oh, was that too large a leap in logic? And it doesn't matter much as far as your training is concerned. We'll teach you how to hold a gun and hold a shovel. By the time you're heading off to your mission, you'll know all too well what war is.

Hm? You don’t think guns are necessary in wars these days?

I wouldn’t be so sure. In my experience, people aren’t all that thankful even when you’re building a school or a hospital.

I wonder why that is.

It doesn’t happen all that often in the grand scheme of things, but maybe it’s because we tend to bring out the guns when we need to settle something once and for all.

Day 1

Part 1

Morning came early for the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion.

Even so, Quenser was not pleased as he rubbed his sleepy eyes in the triple bunk bed he was crammed into and glanced over at the glow-in-the-dark hands of the clock.

"You're kidding, right? It's not even four yet."

It was an oppressively hot August night. He had been woken by the vibration of his wristwatch that was synced with his handheld device, so he sluggishly put his usual military uniform over his sweat-soaked shirt and boxers. To his displeasure, he realized he had been bitten all over by mosquitos and scratched at his arms and legs.

He had been received an urgent summons, so he did not have time to brush his hair or wash his face. He descended the ladder and stepped out into the hall while making sure not to wake the other soldiers in the dark barracks. His face and body were uncomfortably sticky.

His handheld device provided details on the summons.

It was from Frolaytia Capistrano.

He left the normal soldiers' barracks and hurried to the special barracks for officers. He was acting on orders, but he was still blinded by the bright light of a patrolling soldier's military flashlight.

And that soldier turned out to be his awful friend Heivia.

"Huh? What are you doing out this late?"

"Heivia? You didn't have patrol duty tonight, did you?"

"…"

“…”

The two of them exchanged a glance that transformed into a wholehearted look of dread.

Waiting for them in the special barracks was a busty, silver-haired, and highly-educated(?) girl. Despite the late hour, that commanding officer of theirs wore her uniform impeccably.

“When do you sleep?” complained Quenser when he peeked inside her private room which was decorated by her love of the Island Nation.

“I’m more surprised that a battlefield student was sleeping the night away. The lights are still on in the Object maintenance bay, you know?”

Frolaytia tossed him a cylindrical bottle of wet tissues and he wiped off his oily face.

“Could I go observe their work now?”

“Absolutely not.” Their busty commander bluntly rejected the idea. “I called you two here for a reason. And sorry, but I want you to focus on this mission.”

“I don’t think I’m going to have much luck focusing on anything that isn’t peeping on the women’s bath or sneaking a late-night date with a sexually frustrated commander.”

“Do you remember former Councilor Flide?”

“You’re just going to ignore my great sexual harassment joke!? Please stop continuing the conversation like that. Especially when it means bringing up such a super pain-in-the-ass of a guy,” complained Quenser. “Frolaytia, you forgot the part where you tell us there’s no turning back after we hear this and then give us the choice to leave or stay. You’re just dragging us into this without a choice!!”

“That sly old man has nothing to do with this, so calm down. Do you remember the Pilot Elite he raised like a protégé? The one for the Exact Javelin.”

The two idiots exchanged a glance and gave their answers.

“Oh, you mean that one that rose up from its underground base to say hello?”

“No, you moron. It’s the one we fought on some test grounds overflowing with nature.”

“I think you’re getting confused with something else.”

“Hey, I’m dependent on my phone’s address book to make any calls. I doubt I could memorize an eleven digit number. Exact Javelin? It kind of rings a bell, but I can’t quite place it…”

“But I do remember there being a 12-year-old little girl Elite with a blonde braid.”

“But I do remember there being a 12-year-old little girl Elite with a blonde braid.”

“Well, at least I know how awful you two are,” said Frolaytia as she wrote this off as a lost cause.

The two idiots continued tilting their heads, but she got on with the conversation while spinning around her beloved kiseru.

“This is a request from the top brass sitting around in their safe countries. They have finished questioning that 12-year-old Pilot Elite named Catherine Blueangel. Based on the request from her case officer, she wants to retire and return to a normal life instead of living in a military facility while waiting for her ‘next’ Object to be completed…*if* one ever is. We have no objection there, but this girl was separated from the military as a whole as a part of that pig Flide’s personal troops. There are some legitimate concerns whether or not she can really live a normal life.”

“Isn’t this a job for a school counselor?”

“She is going through the Civilian Acclimation Assistance System. Before she is left with the nonresistance group Archaic Smile, she must have her claws and fangs filed down. As someone who is halfway between military and civilian and as the battlefield student who took part in the operation to destroy the Exact Javelin and rescue Catherine, you would be best for the job, Quenser. And Heivia, you’re only the second best option since you’re an official soldier. Do you understand the situation now?”

Seeing the blatant disgust on the two idiots’ faces, Frolaytia gave a

large nod.

“Catherine will accompany you to low-danger battlefields in order to gradually shift her thought processes from those of a battlefield country to those of a safe country. Once her small hands no longer need a gun in them, we can feel comfortable passing her off to a normal school or tutor. We’ll chuck her into a safe country and call it a day. And it won’t take that long. It should be a month or two at most.”

“That explains it,” muttered Heivia.

They were not in a filthy battlefield country like normal. This was still a military mission, but they had received the kind of warm welcome the 37th was usually never lucky enough to receive.

“But I don’t see why you had to wake us up at four in the morning to tell us that.”

“Catherine was the one who requested you two. And she seems to be accustomed to an entirely different time zone. Since the VIP arrived at the maintenance base zone before the newspapers were even delivered, we had to get started early.”

“What?”

Just as Quenser voiced his confusion, a modest knock came at the door.

The two idiots had a bad feeling about this and hesitantly turned around. The door cracked opened, but instead of stepping inside, a 12-year-old poked half her head inside and peered up at the people in the room.

Then the tiny demon nervously spoke.

“Big…brother…?”

Part 2

“It’s August! Summer is in full swing!! This is the season for Monica, the idol reporter who can both dance and sing in a dazzling

bikini!! Umm, according to an announcement by the major sightseeing group Resort & Dolce, their affiliated private resorts are 47% busier than average for this time of year. The heat wave caused by this abnormal weather pattern is sitting over a wide section of the world, so the sightseeing business is booming across the board."

They sat below the scorching sun.

This was the south side of Second Venice. Major Frolaytia Capistrano, the busty silver-haired officer, had changed into a swimsuit and was lying in a beach chair as a cheerful swimsuit idol's voice came from a nearby waterproof pool TV.

"Ahh," sighed the busty commander. "Bikinis really are in this year."

Splashing and the shrill cries of young female soldiers could be heard not far away. The refreshing low-humidity breeze carried a hint of chlorine because this was an outdoor pool, not the ocean.

Villas for the rich were apparently well-equipped with palm trees and hibiscus flowers.

Several beach chairs were lined up along the poolside and the one next to Frolaytia's was occupied by the delinquent noble named Heivia Winchell.

"Should we really be doing this?" he lazily asked.

"If you don't like it, you can change back into your sweaty uniform and get back to work."

"…That's the problem with this busty commander. She can be so inhumanly cruel."

"Can't you tell I'm doing my best to relax here? I'm not going to play along just because you 'felt like saying it'. I know you have zero intention of getting back to your mission. Did you ditch Catherine Blueangel the first chance you got? She's a 12-year-old girl, you know?"

"Boo. I mean, yeah, I did, but a student like Quenser can handle something like this. And Catherine wants to attend a safe country school, right?"

“You’re worse than scum. You’re smegma.”

“What did I say about the inhuman cruelty!?”

Heivia really seemed about to cry, but Frolaytia had no interest in that and rolled away from the idiot. She grabbed a toxically blue drink from the side table, took a sip through the straw, and spotted a female soldier (in a frilly pink swimsuit) approaching her.

“M-Major Capistrano! May I have permission to speak!?”

“You already are speaking. What is it, Myonri?”

“The evacuation of Second Venice’s villa district is complete. The people have been distributed between the concert halls, soccer fields, and indoor winter sports facilities and all 128,501 people on the island have been accounted for.”

“It’s possible the harbor companies hired some undocumented porters to cut down on labor costs. Don’t forget to search the empty city. Nothing good will come of only using those drones that are all the rage these days.”

“Um, I know what you mean, but on what basis should we perform this second search?”

“Water consumption. You can fool the documentation, but you can’t fool the meter. And if you check the water department, it doesn’t violate the individual’s privacy. Focus the search to the areas where the documented number of workers doesn’t fit the water consumption. And don’t forget to check for water dispensers that use bottles.”

Myonri bowed, walked away, and began giving instructions over the radio.

Frolaytia sat up in her beach chair, raised her arms, and bent her back. This pushed out and accentuated her large chest all the more.

“Now, it’s about time to get back to work.”

The wind was a little too strong to be called a Mediterranean resort breeze.

They were in a midair park located 150 meters from the ground.

The roof a modern ultra-high-rise building had been turned into a

large villa. And this one was not the only one. Either due to limited land or as a status symbol, all of the countless buildings had white marble mansions built on their roofs.

They all had pools and tennis courts, but no one was there to use them.

The city was entirely abandoned.

As Myonri had mentioned, the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion was leading a large scale evacuation.

Frolaytia had been enjoying a brief break at one of the open locations, but now she spoke while staring up into the clear blue sky.

"An outdated satellite drop weapon, hm?"

She looked like she could see a venomous snake's eyes glaring back at her from within a bush.

"Now, then. It's time for the world's largest fireworks show."

Part 3

"Should I go with this one or this one…?" asked a voice as clear as a bell.

Quenser wore casual clothing and watched the girl's back as he tried to keep the boredom from his face.

He was with Catherine Blueangel.

She was a 12-year-old girl with her long blonde hair tied in a waist-length braid. And she wore a blue special suit that showed off her juvenile bodylines as clearly as the Princess's did hers. Second Venice was known as one of the world's largest resort cities and she had made a certain request as soon as she had arrived here with Quenser.

"I want to buy some clothes! Or a swimsuit!!"

(Why couldn't she have been at least three years older? Whyyy!?)

It was disappointing, but he could not fast-forward or rewind time. Idiot #1 did his best to motivate himself by deciding he would train her now to become a wonderful beauty in the future. As an advertisement for an official tie-in, the G-cup Oh Ho Ho idol was winking and pressing her breasts together on the store's flat-screen monitor. The contrast was incredible.

Catherine turned around, causing her long braid to sway, and showed Quenser the two products she held in her hands.

"Big brother, should I go with the bikini or the one-piece?"

"Catherine, they have a swimsuit known as a monokini for greedy people like you. It looks like a one-piece from the front and a bikini from behind, so it provides the same enjoyment as a naked apron."

"Ehhh? I see."

It was not that she was disturbed by how seriously he took his answer.

"It's not fun if you just give the answer. I read in a book that the fun is in trying on a bunch of clothes and trying to figure out what you like best!"

"Oh, so is it like taking your time eating instant noodles so they fill you up more?"

"…How insensitive do you have to be to use a comparison like that in front of a girl?"

Catherine decided to try them both on and disappeared behind the fitting room's curtain with both swimsuits in hand.

This mall on the south side had soft lighting, cool air conditioning, and music playing from the store speakers, but there were no other customers and no employees. For the operation to intercept the satellite drop weapon, the normal citizens had already been evacuated to sturdy facilities such as theatres and stadiums.

Quenser sighed and a transmission reached his earpiece.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself…"

"Princess?"

“You may not have had a choice since these were your orders, but keep in mind that you are being paid with everyone’s taxes, Quenser. Hmph.”

The Princess seemed to be in a bad mood.

However, she needed to do a perfect job.

There was of course a good reason for the Legitimacy Kingdom’s 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion to be enjoying themselves in this world-class luxury resort (and spy’s paradise).

“…The satellite drop weapon?”

“Yes.”

That was a bombing weapon that was placed on standby in satellite orbit and would damage an enemy nation by changing its orbit to drop down toward earth when needed.

The one causing problems now was a Legitimacy Kingdom one known as the Supernova.

The model was loaded with a thermobaric warhead that would turn a 1.2 kilometer radius into ashes and the satellite itself was designed for stealth. It normally remained on standby in orbit, so its boosters did not provide much of a heat source. That made it a powerful but difficult to track weapon.

“I wish this was some kind of joke,” complained Quenser Barbotage.

Most of the large shopping mall was covered in glass, so he could see the outside bay area from the swimsuit section. Second Venice was a giant artificial island that moved as it pleased through the Mediterranean Sea and it was currently “moored” at Malta to resupply. The protruding south side of the megafloat was attached to the natural island. The coasts almost looked like mirror images with their rows of high-rose buildings and a fifty meter mass was located near those coasts.

It was the 1st Generation Object known as the Baby Magnum.

It had a spherical main body, an upside-down Y-shaped static electricity propulsion device, and seven main cannons supported by the seven arms attached to its back. Those main cannons could switch between laser beams, low-stability plasma cannons, and

other varieties like a microscope swapping out its lens.

Seeing it through a layer of glass made it look like something happening on TV.

But saying that would only piss off the Princess more, so he held his tongue.

“I really wish they’d done their job managing that thing up there. That bomb was supposed to have been abandoned more than twenty years ago, so why is it about to fall down on us now? And it’s going to fall on an Information Alliance villa region? If this causes any damage, it’ll start a war…”

“It can’t be helped,” said the Princess. “Disarming bombs is part of the military’s job.”

Quenser heard humming from beyond the fitting room curtain. Catherine’s little butt must have been bumping into the curtain because it would sometimes nearly flutter open.

“And despite the impressive-sounding specs, Frolaytia said this won’t be a very difficult mission.”

“Yeah. A satellite drop weapon gives us a lot more opportunities to intercept than a ballistic missile. Plus you’ve got a Generation One, Princess. You have the means to deal with normal weaponry instead of just other Objects. You’ve got a ton of anti-air lasers, so this shouldn’t be hard at all. I mean, your Object was developed to handle an MIRV that breaks apart in midair and scatters twenty or thirty nuclear warheads.”

“H-heh. It’s not that impressive. Heh heh.”

The Princess must have enjoyed having her Object’s specs complimented because it sounded like she had grown imaginary dog ears and an imaginary dog tail.

While looking at the buildings, sea, and sky out the window, Quenser continued with clear annoyance in his voice.

“And I’m not too happy with Frolaytia either. More than half of this is cleaning up after her.”

“You mean that game of musical chairs?”

“This place is called Second Venice, right? And it was originally an Information Alliance luxury resort. But then 37th comes in, accidentally scares off the Object of the group protecting this area of sea, and then takes over Malta as a supply base.”

“But we couldn’t take over Second Venice because it’s a safe country.”

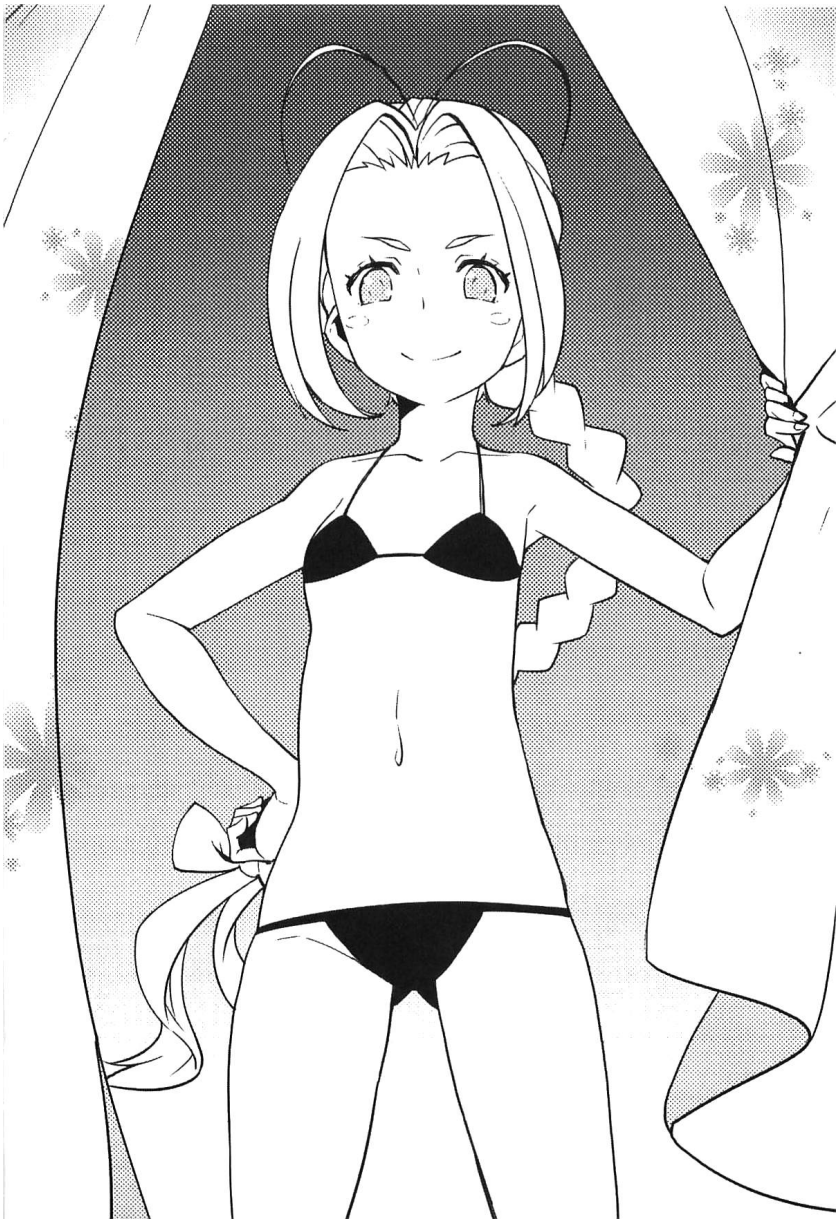
“I think that just put more of a burden on the people defending it. And on top of that, this is where the Supernova is going to fall. That thing was abandoned by the Legitimacy Kingdom and now we’re the only ones that can defend against it since the Information Alliance military withdrew. The timing couldn’t be worse! Why do we have to risk our lives to protect the bulldogs of an enemy nation!? Is this all I’m going to get to do this summer!?”

“Are you that eager to get to the next battlefield, Quenser?”

“Why are enemy nations and battlefields the only options for my summer!? And when I’m standing in a world-class resort no less!!”

Then another transmission reached the radio.

It was from Frolaytia.



“It’s about time for the shooting star to arrive. The fireworks show will begin shortly. Princess, remain on standby in your cockpit.”

“Understood.”

“Done!” shouted a high-pitched voice before the fitting room curtain burst open.

“Heh heh. Bikinis are in this year, aren’t they?”

“I know. Anything but a bikini isn’t even an option. One-pieces are too kiddy.”

For some reason, the Princess agreed with her.

Catherine Blueangel had apparently chosen the black bikini. The student viewed her with the look of a classy gentleman walking through a quiet art museum.

(Yes, her taste shows promise for the future. Now I just have to hope she develops all the right curves.)

Frolaytia interrupted Art Appraiser Quenser.

“And Quenser, you need to regroup with Heivia and get to work.”

“Will we be taking Catherine’s little hand and guiding her to a shelter?”

It was unlikely, but there was a chance they would fail to shoot down the satellite drop weapon. And if it was shot down too low to the ground, the nearby windows could still shatter and create a downpour of glass shards.

Quenser focused on the conversation in his earpiece and used his empty hand to gesture Catherine over.

But…

“Unfortunately, we discovered someone on the list who was not evacuated. His name is Faires Appetizer. He seems to be an Information Alliance astronomer, but the point is we can’t find the old man. Search the city before the fireworks show begins. Looking at the situation, you have less than twenty minutes.”

“Oh, goddammit! We’re stuck working to the very, very end!?”

“The site isn’t far. It’s in the south side where we are. We fortunately, picked up his smartphone’s GPS signal, so you can use that. If you don’t collect him soon, you’ll be caught in the middle of the fireworks show. Even if the Princess intercepts the Supernova itself, the shockwave could shatter all the windows in the buildings. If you don’t want shards of glass pouring down on you, then get this over with and find a building basement to shelter in. That is all.”

“That is all!? What about Catherine!?”

“Take her with you. Think of this as a form of recreation. You aren’t her guardian and when it comes to pure combat technique, she’s a hundred times more powerful than you thanks to the various measures taken to artificially strengthen her.”

“…A hundred times?”

“I’m not exaggerating. And I’m hanging up.”

The transmission ended.

Quenser sighed and the 12-year-old girl placed her hands on her bikini-wearing hips after listening in to the conversation.

“That’s right. A hundred times. Nee hee.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. …Princess, talk to you later.”

“Understood. Don’t do anything reckless, Quenser.”

As a Pilot Elite, Catherine seemed to have quite a lot of money. She operated the card reader to pay for the swimsuit with electronic money. Being able to pay without a cashier present was convenient.

“Here, big brother, give me a stamp!”

“Yes, yes.”

Catherine held out a waterproof case and Quenser pulled out something like a cardboard bingo card and made a round stamp on one corner. This was her quota for a normal life. Once she completed everything on the card, she levelled up to the next stage. This was effectively the first and last hurdle and she only had a simple interview afterwards. The process was known as the Civilian Acclimation Assistance System. It sounded strict, but it was actually made so hopeful participants could efficiently be given the go-ahead on moving to a safe country. It worked differently than the exams for an elite university or an international certification where failing was the standard outcome.

“Heh heh heh.”

“Hm? You’re in a good mood, Catherine.”

“You don’t get it? A girl’s swimsuit has a special meaning!”

Catherine stuffed her special suit inside the waterproof paper bag to

a trendy store that would likely act as a status symbol itself. She then walked with Quenser through the large mall while still in her bikini. People must have dropped things during the confusion of the evacuation because bouquets of flowers and bead accessories were lying on the floor. Of course, they were all products with an egregious mark up to rip off ignorant tourists. Those tourist traps were apparently found in malls as well as along the roads near the airport.

After leaving the air conditioned building, they found Heivia in his uniform that had to be torture in the sweltering sun.

“Took you long enough.”

“What’s with the camo pants? Second Venice is all about operas and musicals, so there’s no place for a street dancer here. Yo yo.”

“Dammit, just you watch. Ahh, I shouldn’t have left her with you just because she’s outside my strike zone. All I did was enjoy the view of that busty commander in her bikini, and this is what I get. I’m right back into my uniform. Anyway, your bomb-filled backpack is in the sidecar.”

However, that awful friend of a noble was not on a motorcycle.

He was on a water scooter floating in a seawater canal. He must have been planning on picking up Quenser and Catherine to begin with because something like a motorcycle sidecar was attached.

“Let’s go nab that old astronomer and get to shelter. I can’t stand seeing all this luxury. It’s pointless if I can’t visit here on my time off!!”

The water scooter had two open spots: behind Heivia and the sidecar.

(Well, Heivia’s a pervert, so I guess I’ll sit behind him so Catherine can have the sidecar.)

With that in mind, Quenser stepped from the edge of the canal and toward the back seat of the water scooter.

Then he heard an odd voice behind him.

“On you go!”

“Wait, Catherine? Dwabh!?”

Just as he started shifting his center of gravity, she kicked him in the back. He flipped over, missed his target, and rolled into the sidecar.

And it did not end there.

The small 12-year-old in a black bikini hopped on top of his lap. She ignored the confused student and opened up the sidecar’s dashboard.

“ ‘Use a map to give someone directions.’ …There it is. That’s another stamp!!”

“Check inside the dashboard if you like, but don’t lift your hips like that, Catherine. Your butt is in a pretty dangerous spot there. And it’s only covered by a black bikini.”

“Oh, whoops. How indecent of me. A lady needs to sit properly, doesn’t she?”

“I’m not sure nestling down on my lap like that is better. Your butt just likes to cause trouble, doesn’t it?”

“You really are completely indiscriminate now, aren’t you?” commented Heivia while holding the handlebars.

“I don’t like being blamed when I’m the one under attack here. And I don’t know why she’s so fond of me either. Hey, Catherine, why am I the only one you call ‘big brother’?”

“Hm? Because you’re big brother!”

She had plenty of energy, but her answer was not very helpful. Meanwhile, the clock was ticking and they could not wait around. Heivia twisted the handlebar grip, opened the throttle, and sent the water scooter racing along the canal that reflected the bright sun.

The scenery around them was an endless spider web of various-sized canals and countless bridges passing by overhead. A boat loaded with containers or an empty aquatic bus would occasionally pass them by, but they must have been unmanned.

To complete the task on her quota card, Catherine pointed out the way and Heivia steered them through the many canals. As usual,

Quenser was nothing more than ballast as the young girl sat on his lap.

“It’s amazing how there really isn’t a single road in this city.”

“Second Venice is all about reminding you of the good old days. If you were making a city of slopes and stairs, adding an elevator would ruin it, right? They dug a bunch of grooves along the surface of the pizza and let the seawater fill them. This kind of ‘comfortable inconvenience’ is something you see in the hospitality industry as well as tourist sites. If everything is too perfect, people get tired of it pretty quickly. It’s the same as a popular restaurant intentionally reducing the number of seats so a line forms out front or like increasing the difficulty level in a video game.”

Their maintenance base zone was made from more than one hundred giant wheeled vehicles, so it was poorly suited for Second Venice where canals were the only form of travel. The base was deployed on nearby Malta.

They passed through the gap between high-rise buildings and squeezed past an aquatic bus as they continued on their way to the astronomer.

“Didn’t they say the land here is twenty times as expensive as in London? That’s why these tall buildings are all crammed in so tight.”

“The construction companies are the ones making the real money. They use fancy words like artificial island and megafloat, but it’s really a bunch of giant boxes made of aluminum. They’ve just marked up the price like crazy. It’s worse than the diamond or gold markets.”

“Yeah, the winners tend to win big. …Catherine, don’t squirm like that. Try to keep in mind what your little butt is sitting on.”

“Nn,” was all the braid girl said, but she seemed to be in a bad mood.

But not because she was focused on reading the map. She was having trouble breaking into the two idiots’ conversation.

“But it’s a hell of a coincidence that this is where the Supernova is falling, so I believe it’s partially a form of divine punishment. God is watching and the commoner’s prayers are reaching him.”

“Aren’t you a super-spoiled noble?”

Quenser sat in the egg-shaped sidecar with Catherine on his lap. Like a human seatbelt, he naturally ended up wrapping his arms around her slender body to take a look at his handheld device.

It showed a map of Second Venice’s south side. But unlike Catherine’s paper map, it was zoomed in and their target was displayed as a dot.

“An astronomer, huh? …Why did that old man run off?”

“How should I know? Rumors spread pretty easily during disasters. Maybe he’s afraid the Legitimacy Kingdom has an ulterior motive for rounding all the tourists up in one spot. Maybe he thinks we’ll ransack the city while everyone’s away or slaughter everyone on the indoor ski slope. Putting unseen worries into concrete words is a stereotypical way of dealing with that anxiety.”

“A disaster?”

“You didn’t know, Quenser? Natural disasters aren’t the only kind. Our military receives funding for retrieval of unexploded ordnance as disaster relief.”

“So we bury the ordnance and then get paid to dig it back up?”

As they chatted, Heivia stopped the water scooter on the side of the canal.

“He’d probably notice if we drove any closer.” Heivia reached toward the sidecar. “Little bikini devil? There’s a pair of binoculars in the dashboard.”

“I can see without them. The package is 120 meters ahead.”

But since she could not share that information, Quenser reached below the girl’s arms and pulled out the binoculars. This required leaning forward, so he could not help but stick his nose toward the nape of her neck.

“Big brother, that tickles.”

“Hmm, so they have a feminine scent to their hair even at this age.”

“I get it, so just let me do my job!!” tearfully shouted Heivia.

Quenser handed him the binoculars.

“Oh, there he is. That old man must be Faires Appetizer. But something isn’t right.”

“What is it?”

“He’s at the harbor, but there aren’t any boats. He’s holding his hands in the air. And there are several men and women around him. The one behind him is holding out something long and narrow. What is it? An assault rifle?”

Swimsuit Catherine added her own information from Quenser’s lap.

“There is a boat. Check the water’s surface more carefully. You can see a glimpse of a sunken yacht’s mast.”

Quenser was a complete amateur and had no way of checking on the situation, but he could tell this sounded like a pain in the ass. The old man had ignored the need to evacuate despite the risk and now someone had the kind of high-firepower gun unlikely to be found in the hands of anyone respectable.

“Who are they?”

“It doesn’t matter. As long as they aren’t amateurs.”

“We’re about 120 meters away, but do you think you can take them out with your rifle, Heivia?”

“I could shoot them easily enough, but don’t forget what I just said.” Heivia gave an annoyed shrug. “We have to check to make sure they aren’t amateurs. Simply put, we have to say ‘stop’ and ‘put your hands up’. We can’t shoot unless they show intent to resist. This isn’t a battlefield country after all.”

“Even though they have a hostage?”

“Waste time doing that and they’ll shoot the old man,” said Catherine.

“Yeah.”

Quenser’s awful friend grinned.

And then he pointed up at the sweltering sun.

“I know a bit of a trick we can use. Care to try it, student?”

Part 4

The Princess sat in the cockpit of the Baby Magnum which had naval floats equipped. The transmissions from Frolaytia and the Legitimacy Kingdom were not the only ones she was picking up.

There were some from their enemies in the Information Alliance.

“Oh ho ho. That Supernova thing will be falling soon. This should be a good chance to see what you can do.”

“I know that.”

“Yes, I can see a Legitimacy Kingdom Object take responsibility for a Legitimacy Kingdom satellite drop weapon. Pu hu hu! You have become the guardian deities of Second Venice, an Information Alliance luxury resort, haven’t you?”

“Again, I know that!!”

“I’d really like for you to get this over with. Oh ho ho. Unlike some filthy Elites I could mention, I am quite busy. Right at this moment, I am in the middle of the final planning meeting for an online concert. I will show you that a truly exciting Second Venice vacation involves a passionate musical performance in a swimsuit. Ho ho ho. Oh ho ho ho ho ho ho ho!!”

The angry Princess considered switching off her radio, but she just barely managed to resist.

(I could easily handle this ballistic weapon on my own.)

She pouted her lips, but more than one hundred thousand lives (even if they were from an enemy nation) rested on her shoulders. The more air defense weapons and anti-air lasers they had, the better.

She sighed and spoke to the other Elite.

“A Generation One will have better missile defense capabilities. I

will take the lead role, so try not to get in my way."

"Oh ho ho. Not to worry. I will leave this odd job to you."

With a quiet beeping, new information was added to the monitor.

"Princess, the Supernova has begun reentry. As we suspected, it isn't looking like it will burn up on the way. We are beginning the countdown based on the expected descent route. 30, 29, 28, 27, 26, 25…"

She did not wait.

A moment later, both the Baby Magnum and the Rush filled the entire sky with a spider web of blinding light.

Part 5

The entire sky was wrapped in flashes as bright as welding light.

Laser light itself could not be seen by the human eye. This light was the accumulated energy being released in every direction when the laser light struck the surface of the Supernova satellite drop weapon as it reentered the atmosphere.

And on the south side, Heivia used that exact timing to drive the water scooter full speed ahead while yelling.

"Attention suspicious people!! Put your guns down and your hands in the air!! You appear to have a hostage, so if you resist, we will follow the Legitimacy Kingdom peace preservation manual by opening fire!!"

"There's no way they can hear you during this explosion…"

"That's fine. If they did hear us, they'd probably actually shoot back."

"You're setting it up so we warned them, but they 'just so happened' not to hear it? You monster."

As Heivia drove the water scooter with sidecar, they managed to

arrive near the harbor in question while staying hidden behind an unmanned transportation boat loaded with containers. Heivia operated the throttle with one hand, and…

“I can’t fire my assault rifle with just one hand. Hey, student, I’ll give you the assault rifle, so you shoot.”

It was Catherine whose eyebrows twitched, not Quenser.

“Aim carefully and you can’t miss. This will start the second we move out from behind this boat. It’s shoot or be shot. That’s all there is to it.”

“Please no! I’ll probably end up shooting you right in the ass!”

“If you’re wearing casual clothes and you can’t even shoot, why did you even come along!?”

“I’m just a spectator!! Why couldn’t you figure that out!? You’re stupid *and* incompetent!!”

Heivia did not seem to hear Quenser’s complaints. His mind apparently filtered out all verbal abuse that did not come from a cute girl. He pulled out the large handgun that he kept as a sidearm and tossed the assault rifle to the sidecar.

Then something unexpected happened.

As the firearm flew through the air, two hands not belonging to Quenser grabbed it.

They belonged to Catherine Blueangel, the little black bikini devil.

“Oh, damn!”

“Hee hee hee. Since you can’t do it, I’ll help out☆”

Before they could say anything, Catherine hopped from the sidecar to the back seat of the water scooter. Then she built up her momentum and climbed up onto the unmanned transportation boat.

“Catherine!”

“If I let you two go in without a real plan, you’ll just get killed. I’ll attack from a different angle, so let’s finish them off with some crossfire, okay? Big brother, make sure to give me my stamp for giving directions afterwards. Adieu.”

They did not have time to go after her.

Quenser ducked down as the gunfire started.

“Now she’s done it!”

“That kid’s got a light trigger finger!! I can see why they didn’t think an elegant safe country tutor could handle her. They’d get their hand bit!!”

With multiple enemies, Catherine on her own would get caught in some crossfire, so Heivia sent the water scooter out from behind the boat they were using for cover. He prepared to fire toward the harbor with his large handgun.

But then he came to a stop because he could not believe his eyes.

“Wh-what!?”

Catherine Blueangel was there.

She was not firing the assault rifle toward the harbor from the top of the boat. She ran along the deck, made a large leap, landed directly on the harbor, and continued firing at point-blank range.

It looked like a dance.

Her young body was too light to fully suppress the assault rifle’s recoil. Instead, she actually let the explosive force of the gunpowder swing her around. She spun around and around to the left, to the right, vertically, and horizontally. She pulled off some acrobatic movements that would have normally been impossible. She was exposed to multiple guns, but she never once crossed even one line of fire. Each time she swung her arms, raised her legs, or bent her torso, the flying bullets whizzed right past her but never even grazed her.

“What happened to that crossfire idea, you damn hornet? You’ve run out there on your own!!”

Her movements were so unconventional that Heivia could not even provide covering fire.

And before he could figure out what to do, it was all over.

The armed men and women had been wiped out.

Only the gray-haired old man remained and had collapsed into a sitting position.

“Ah, ahh, ahhhh…”

The black bikini girl used one hand to casually aim the assault rifle at the back of the old man’s head. And she asked an innocent question.

“Umm, am I supposed to shoot him or not?”

“Stop, Catherine!! He’s the package we’re supposed to protect!!”

“Nn,” was all Catherine said as she lifted the assault rifle up and away from the old man. As if he had suddenly realize something frightening, the old man tried to crawl away, but she did not hesitate to slam the rifle’s stock against the back of his head.

“Oops.”

Catherine seemed to hug the rifle to her body.

No. She was quickly holding a certain piece of cloth in place.

“Biiiig broooother, my top came untied.”

“Oh, honestly. Why would you start a gunfight in a bikini!?”

“Uuh… Could you retie it for me?”

She held the top with her hands and turned her small, bared back toward Quenser who sighed and grabbed the fluttering strings.

“Your fingers tickle.”

“Don’t move, Catherine. I’ll tie you a nice bow.”

Heivia looked at the old man who had been knocked out by the blow to the head, at the corpses littering the area, and at Catherine who was defenselessly showing off her dazzling back as if she were asking someone to apply sun oil. Finally, he summed it all up.

“What a dangerous girl.”

“But we should have a chance to give some course corrections. We could make her into a class rep type that looks good in glasses or we could make her into a track girl with a dazzling brown tan.

What matters is that we at least make her into something hot."

Before they could say anything more, the blue sky was covered by another flash of light that could not be good for their health.

Quenser looked up in confusion.

"Wait a second… Wasn't there only one Supernova dropping down toward here?"

"Then what-…"

Heivia trailed off when he seemed to realize something.

Quenser had finished tying the bow, so Catherine could move again and she collected the mysterious old man who had been tossed aside like a garbage bag.

"Then what dropped down to create that second flash…?"

Part 6

After changing from her swimsuit into her uniform and boarding the antenna-covered mission command patrol boat stopped at the base of the high-rise building, Frolaytia listened to the report with a look of displeasure.

"What do you mean!? That isn't what we were told!!"

"N-no, but it seems there was more than just the one Supernova. Um, 15, 20, 40, 80…you're kidding. The number's still growing…!?"

"It can't possibly be in the triple digits. Don't fall for this deception! The Supernovas are scattering chaff or flares to prevent anyone from shooting them down. There weren't that many satellite drop weapons left!!"

"But that means…"

Even the operators in the same patrol boat gave Frolaytia anxious looks.

“Right. These aren’t old abandoned weapons that just so happened to fall. Their systems are up and running and some idiot intentionally dropped them down on this trajectory!”

The screen displayed all sorts of information on the Supernovas. They would scatter chaff or flares to break any targeting locks. They would fire their boosters at random to move around like living creatures. They would hide behind another Supernova to use that one as a shield. They had several strategies for escaping an Object’s anti-air lasers.

They were old weapons that had been abandoned more than two decades ago.

Just like performing a cyber attack on a computer with no updates at all, anyone could hijack them. But…

“What idiot is borrowing them for some cheap plot?”

Frolaytia clenched her teeth.

No matter who did this or why, the Supernovas were loaded with thermobaric warheads capable of turning everything within 1.2 kilometers into ash. What if the Princess missed just one? If it landed on a domed stadium or soccer field being used as a shelter, tens of thousands of lives would be burned away in an instant.

And now dozens of those Supernovas were descending at once.

Part 7

The Princess also clenched her teeth.

“…Ksshh… Tch. There’s a drop in my accuracy…ksshh!”

“I think the Supernova fragments are functioning like chaff.”

“How are you managing?”

“I am still fine.”

“Oh ho ho. Yes, I should probably leave this type of job to the First

Generation."

"That's what I've been telling you."

They had not been coordinating their actions. They had simply been aiming for the same target with multiple laser beams to increase the density of their barrage. So even if the Information Alliance's Rush began to malfunction, it would not create a hole right away. The Princess had not been relying on her to that extent.

She could still do this.

Everything was fine.

The Baby Magnum was designed to intercept a MIRV that broke apart at high altitude and scattered dozens of small nuclear warheads, so its anti-air defenses were more than enough.

However…

That was when something else happened.

"…?"

The Princess was overcome by a sense that something was wrong.

Part 8

"It's all over…"

The old man was muttering something as Quenser held onto him.

He repeated the same thing over and over again.

"We're done for. It wouldn't take that trajectory. There's only one explanation…"

"What are you on about?"

"It's a little soon to get all apocalyptic, old man. Our Princess will blow away the Supernovas. You shouldn't make those meaningful sounding comments. All those books explaining Nostradamus became nothing but laughing stocks once the new millennium

began. Of course, those people are just like the ones who write diet books; no matter how many times they fail, they'll always look for new material."

"Should I make him talk?" asked Catherine with a tilt of the head.

Quenser held out his empty hand to stop her. She may have just wanted to show off, but he had to stop her from hurting or harming the old man. And this would not get her any stamps for her quota sheet.

"No, not that."

Faires Appetizer's shoulders shook as he cut in.

He looked to the two idiots and continued his confession.

"That puny manmade model doesn't matter."

"?"

"You don't know?"

He actually looked shocked.

One of the Information Alliance's leading astronomers revealed a piece of trivia.

"Today we will receive an astronomy show that occurs only once every 500 years. This is the day the Appetizer Asteroid passes closest to earth."

Part 9

"This is not good…"

Frolaytia gulped inside the mission command patrol boat.

She wanted to believe the report was in error, but praying would not change reality.

"Princess!! There's another problem making a descent along with the Supernova! It's a 500 meter mass. It's almost certainly the

Appetizer Asteroid!!”

“…What? No one told me about that!”

“I only just learned about it. I want to punch that Appetizer old man who so casually announced the predicted trajectory of approach, but we have to respond to the situation as it is. We’ve left the safe track we all thought we were on. At this rate, it’ll fall right on Second Venice!!”

“But Frolaytia…”

“We have to do it. It’s 500 meters, so if it hits, we can’t avoid a new ice age. This problem is no longer isolated to the resort island.”

“My anti-air lasers can’t completely destroy an asteroid. And when it breaks apart in midair, a shockwave will pummel the area!”

“…”

On occasion, a giant scorch mark with a radius of several dozen to a hundred kilometers would be found in the empty mountains or desert. However, that was not caused by a UFO crashing or an out-of-place artifact. It came from the explosion caused by a meteor or asteroid breaking apart in midair before striking the surface.

If the same thing happened here, it would cause great damage to Second Venice and Malta.

At 500 meters, even the smaller fragments were a serious threat. They could create craters across the artificial island and even knock over the high-rise buildings.

But…

“If we let it hit, the entire earth will fall into an ice age.”

“Kh.”

“So do it, Princess!! The responsibility falls on me. Focus on that asteroid!!”

Part 10

In that instant, the Information Alliance's Second Generation Rush calmly passed the baton even though it was meant to protect Second Venice. Was the Elite leaving this to the Legitimacy Kingdom First Generation because she was not used to this sort of ballistic interception, or was she refusing to take responsibility for any actions not in her manual?

The Princess clenched her teeth.

Her goggles read the movements of her eyes and targeted the giant mass.

Her fingertip touched the protrusion on the surface of the lever she held.

She breathed in and out.

She made up her mind.

Blinding light surrounded the Appetizer Asteroid and it was broken into six blocks in midair.

Part 11

They had no idea what had happened.

"Owwwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

but they did not have time to comment on that.

“Cough! Cough!!”

“Dammit… What was that!?”

They heard the deep, unpleasant sound of something bending. Quenser got up using the small hand Catherine held out to him and then he looked to the ceiling. Large cracks were running through it and they were spreading.

“Oh, no. Oh, no! Is the building going to collapse!?”

“Idiot! Don’t just run outside! It’s more dangerous out there!!”

Quenser immediately tried to run, but Heivia grabbed his arm and pulled him back just as an adjacent building collapsed. Gray dust spread like cotton candy and entered their building thanks to the broken glass.

“What? Cough. I don’t have any survival training. What’s the right thing to do!?”

“I don’t know either, dammit. Frolaytia! Hey, busty commander! Tell us what happened!!”

Beyond the thick curtain of dust, Heivia shouted angrily into his radio, but no one replied. Was the dust reflecting the signal like chaff, or were the people on the other end in no state to reply?

“Oh, good. My stamp card is safe.”

Catherine peeked inside the bag that held her special suit and gave a cheerfully out-of-place comment, so Quenser grabbed her small hand and started to move.

“Hm? Wait, big brother. I think my bikini is about to come undone again.”

“Which knot!?”

“The one on my left hip.”

They broke through the dusty air as he took care of that.

They wanted to see what had happened.



They reached the elevator button, but it did not react. They climbed a few floors on the nearby stairs and entered an office full of computers that looked set up for investing. They approached the window that's reinforced glass had been broken by the shockwave and secured a view of the city.

"Wow," said small Catherine.

It looked like the end of the world.

Several of the tidy-looking high-rise buildings had been knocked over and the giant villas on the rooftops had been slammed to the ground. One building falling must have affected those around it because the ordered cityscape had been crudely stained like an arrangement of dominos that had failed to topple properly. The residents and tourists had been evacuated, but they could still see fires here and there. There had likely been electrical or gas trouble. The resort island's blue skies and sea breeze were surrounded by the color gray and simply breathing in the air made them want to go get a health checkup.

"The whole place is messed up. But there's a pattern to the collapsed buildings. It's like there are a few different craters."

"Did the Princess fail to intercept the Supernova?"

"That thing was thermobaric and would've turned the entire city to ashes."

"Then…"

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance.

"Don't tell me that old man was right."

"Did an asteroid really hit!? You've gotta be kidding me!!"

Quenser cut across the floor so he could see the ocean. His radio was useless, but he still wanted to see the Baby Magnum with his own eyes.

But…

"Hey, look…"

"What is it, Quen-…what the hell is that!!!??"

Only Heivia's yell rang through the air.

The broken window gave them a view of the coast through the buildings. The Baby Magnum should have reigned supreme beyond that.

But its spherical main body had been badly torn apart.

The Object looked like an empty box of chocolates after it was stepped on.

This was medium to heavy damage. There was no chance it could move properly now.

“The Princess fought to the end.” Quenser blankly stated his guess as to what had happened. “But it wasn’t enough. She didn’t make it in time. The asteroid broke into a few different pieces in midair and fell on the city. And one of those hit the Baby Magnum!!”

“That’s a big deal, but what do we do now? They aren’t going to blame us for failing to stop the asteroid, are they!? I don’t want to spend the rest of my summer doing construction work to restore an enemy nation’s resort island. And all of these villas have to have been expensive!!”

The two idiots exchanged a glance, but blonde braided Catherine was innocently – if not cruelly – unfazed.

“What are you going to do, big brother?”

“If that was the last explosion, we don’t have to worry about any more glass shards raining down on us, right?”

“But entire buildings could collapse after a delay. Wouldn’t it be best to stay here until things settle down?”

“You have a point. …But what if this bank itself falls over?”

Silence fell.

Heivia scratched at his dusty bangs before answering.

“I guess that’s not an option. Let’s get back to the maintenance base zone.”

“Is that fine with you, Catherine? Do you want to get back to Malta?”

Quenser and Heivia cautiously stepped out into the gray city. Catherine seemed to be enjoying herself as she followed them, or maybe she was giving the boys an appraising look.

The oppressive sun was entirely gone now. A thick gray curtain covered everything instead. But this was not a normal raincloud. It was all the soot and dust produced when the asteroid had exploded in midair. Closer to the ground, dust rapidly expanded like dirty cotton candy near the collapsed buildings. All glass had been

shattered, the buildings were tilted, and devices the size of vending machines – transformers for the underground power lines – were bent and emitting sparks. Thick cables dangled down onto the ground and even into the spider web of canals.

“Looks like we should give up on using a water scooter.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to find one. Did they sink or were they washed away by the waves caused by the shockwave? Dammit.”

Luckily, most of the people had been evacuated to theatres and stadiums. The entire area was covered with glass, but they did not see any bloody people groaning in pain. If the place had been as busy as it normally was, they would have seen a true hell.

That was when they heard a low rumbling.

Quenser looked up and grimaced.

“Wait, really…?”

He felt something cold on his nose.

The next thing he knew, rain was pouring down on them.

“Damn. That was originally water vapor and dust, so can it really make rainclouds? And the broken transformers are sending sparks everywhere!!”

This was not over yet.

Traveling had been easy enough when using a water scooter in the canals, but it took much longer once they had to walk through the ruined city on foot. And that was true even from the south side, which was closest to Malta.

Heivia wiped sweat from his brow and groaned.

“What the hell? The raindrops are dirty…”

“They’ve got the asteroid’s dust in them. It would be best not to let any get in your mouth, Catherine.”

“I won’t do that.”

Large raindrops poured down. It was a truly unnatural downpour

produced by clouds of dust. It sounded like radio static and the three of them could only drag their heavy bodies along like zombies.

“We can’t get through here with the building collapsed…”

“Big brother, the way is clear over there.”

“We can’t use that because of the broken transformer. See how the area is soaked with rainwater? We don’t know how far the electricity is getting, so it would be best not to approach.”

“Hey, the building collapsed, but there’s still a way through in the center. We can’t just sit around. It would be faster to cut through.”

They walked down that path to return to the maintenance base.

Each step felt like a gamble. It was like betting the chips of their lives on information of dubious accuracy. They took each step slowly and cautiously, so when a bridge was out, it could take an hour to find another way across.

By the time they were close to the maintenance base zone, it was already growing dark. They had known this was a midsummer resort, but the constant barrage of raindrops had a way of sapping their strength. It felt like they had soaked inside a hot bath until the heat had permeated the core of their bodies.

And as they made that nerve-racking journey, something changed.

“Wh-what…?”

Quenser looked around while dragging along his uniform that was heavy with water.

“There’s a ton of people here. I thought they were all evacuated.”

“Don’t ask me, dammit. Don’t tell me this wave of people is-…yeah, I was right. They’re headed for our base, aren’t they?”

A lot of them had nothing but the shirt on their back. Some were young women in rain-soaked swimsuits or bunny suits and some were macho men in thin armor made from light aluminum or something. Normally, those people would probably ask a tourist to take a commemorative photo with them and then charge an outrageous fee. The people in berets and carrying art sets did the

same thing after painting someone's portrait. Some people were holding their surfboards up to keep out the rain and others were using several café parasols to create a hemispherical tent.

Perhaps because this was a world-class seaside luxury resort, a lot of people were carrying expensive cameras.

"This is Monica, the idol reporter who can both dance and sing! It's fine, it's fine. I can review the five-star hotel in my bikini later! And how many times are you going to wake me up to try to scare me!? I'm getting awful tired of it!! An asteroid hit? Let's document that! We can figure out whether or not we can sell it to a communications company later!! Um, we are in front of the Legitimacy Kingdom maintenance base zone and…"

"!!!"

"Hm? What is it, Quenser?"

"Oh, nothing," said the student as he ducked his head down. He had apparently spotted someone in the crowd who he wanted to avoid.

Also, some in the crowd were using their portrait art sets in an odd way.

"Hey, some of them are holding up signs."

Once the little black bikini devil pointed it out, Quenser and Heivia finally noticed. The crowd grew denser as they drew closer to the base and that was due to more than confusion over the sudden disaster. There was definite anger there and it was focused on a single issue.

"What's going to happen to us now!?"

"S-Second Venice is a manmade island. Without food and water, we'll wither away!!"

"The military needs to take responsibility and protect us! I have a baby to look after!!"

Heivia looked puzzled.

"Tch. What? They've started protesting?"

"But Heivia, it's true that food and water are a serious issue. How many people are there here on Second Venice?"

“Myonri said nearly 130,000.”

“Our unit can’t feed that many.”

“Are you serious about that? First off, our battalion has 1000 people. We keep enough supplies to feed us all for 30 days. And that’s assuming three meals a day. Put up with some hunger and limit ourselves to one meal a day and that number triples. That alone gives us enough for 90,000. And don’t forget that the Rush’s Oh Ho Ho has her unit stationed here.” Heivia sounded exasperated. “Besides, this isn’t a desert on the moon. It’s a Mediterranean resort. The Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization’s home countries are right there. Surviving on our own might be tough, but transport ships can reach us in a matter of hours. No matter how long it takes to recover, we’ll have plenty of supplies if we can last a day or two. We might actually head back fatter than we arrived.”

“Is that…how it works?”

“It is. Not to mention that Second Venice is known as a spy’s paradise because the wealthy of all four world powers can relax here and forget all about war. No one’s going to abandon this place. In fact, it’s a great opportunity to do some favors to make some debts. Hand over our tasteless soap-like rations now and we might get gold bars the same size in return.”

Heivia was entirely carefree.

And once they started listening, they could hear a voice answering the shouting crowd. A familiar voice was amplified by a handheld megaphone.

“Don’t push! Please don’t push! We have food enough for everybody, so please wait your turn!”

“Myonri got the short end of the stick again, did she?”

Quenser relaxed when he heard that awful friend’s voice.

But then he heard the unique dry sound of bursting gunpowder.

A fireworks-like smell mixed with a rusty flavor.

The crowd ground to a halt like a malfunctioning machine and then it tried to scatter in every direction. But that caused them to run into each other, knock each other over, and trip each other up.

Meanwhile, a high-pitched voice came from beyond the human curtain. The scream passed over everyone's heads and could have been a male or female voice.

Whoever it belonged to, it said the following:

"Like I said!! Hurry up and hand over the fooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooood!!"

Oh, no, thought Quenser.

The discomfort of the pouring rain vanished from his mind. This was no time for that, so his brain automatically narrowed down his information to the absolute essentials.

He could sense an invisible pressure approaching through the gaps in the crowd.

He felt someone's eyes on him.

A large and enraged man in a tank top had tears and snot covering his face as he aimed their way with a gun that was clearly not a civilian model. It looked like the fusion of a semi-auto grenade launcher and a close-range handgun. And he did not seem to care how many other people were around.

"This is really bad…!!"

Part 12

The Baby Magnum had grown terribly misshapen thanks to the direct hit from a piece of the Appetizer Asteroid, but the Princess remained in the cockpit. The reactor and the system's core were still functioning. Even if she could not pull off any high-speed combat, she would still make for a decent threat as a stationary gun platform. It was not yet time for her to leave the Object.

And as she took a short rest, some dangerous thoughts entered her mind.

(Just when I began to intercept the Appetizer Asteroid…)

She looked down from the sky and saw the Rush calmly leaving.

The Princess glared at the Object.

(She fired a jamming signal my way?)

Various suspicions filled her heart as a new war began.

Under the extreme environment of this disaster, international law and war treaties no longer applied.

A truly hopeless war was beginning.

External Document – A Will Written in Advance

They asked me if I wanted my name to go down in history.

Currently, almost 36,000 asteroids have been observed and registered by astronomers. They are named after the Greek gods, after the discoverer, or after a product like a sports drink or a search engine.

Naming it the Appetizer Asteroid was a form of legacy right there.

But that achievement did not stand out and was unknown to the general public. Someone with unique interests would have to search again and again before seeing that legacy.

But the number of asteroids which have entered the atmosphere and hit the earth is much lower. Ones that did not break up in the atmosphere and retained their shape can be counted on your fingers.

It would be a top ten achievement.

No one could help but see the bright light of that legacy.

All they asked me to do was overlook it. Just like any astronomer would, I carefully observed the asteroid I had discovered and named after myself. No one observed it more obsessively than me. So I noticed something was wrong almost immediately. They just wanted me to overlook it.

I still have my doubts.

I don’t think I will ever rid myself of those doubts.

I don’t know what exactly they are trying to do. How can an amateur guess at what the military is after? But if the Appetizer Asteroid hits the surface, it will cause incredible damage. Enough to change this age of clean wars ruled by Objects.

I don’t know what kind of legacy this will be.

Perhaps this is how researchers feel when a strange parasite or killer virus is named after them.

This legacy will undoubtedly leave my name in history.

But I will always have my doubts. Even if mankind is covered in a layer of ice and snow, I will forever wander that white and hellish wasteland as a ghost.

Day 2

Part 1

Midnight arrived and the date changed.

Frolaytia Capistrano held her head in her hands as she received the report.

She had used the antenna-covered command patrol boat to leave Second Venice via the canals and arrive at the maintenance base zone on the coast of Malta.

"…So you shot him? You shot a civilian in front of a crowd."

"He shot Myonri!" said Heivia over the radio. "And his weapon clearly wasn't civilian. If he had used a grenade, the place would have been a sea of blood!!"

He had a point, but it meant nothing in this case.

This had all begun when a clash between the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Information Alliance had lowered the defenses of Second Venice as it was stopped alongside Malta.

Then several Legitimacy Kingdom Supernovas had arrived.

Finally, the Appetizer Asteroid had acted as a giant bonus prize. If the Baby Magnum had not destroyed the asteroid, it might have triggered a global ice age, but how had all of that looked to the people of Second Venice who were mostly from the Information Alliance? Even the midair explosion of the asteroid could have looked like a failure of an enemy nation.

And then the firefight had happened.

The Information Alliance crowd had felt the Legitimacy Kingdom had a duty to save them, but then the soldiers had fired on them.

Not shooting the man would have caused even more damage thanks to the grenade launcher and Heivia had been overwhelmingly right to act.

But not everyone would have an equal understanding of that fact.

(Damn. Everything is working against us here. At this rate, the nearly 130,000 VIPs could start rioting!!)

They were indeed a step away from that.

No one had climbed over the fence yet, but a great crowd was surrounding the maintenance base.

If someone did climb the fence, the Legitimacy Kingdom would show no mercy even if it was a civilian. If safely securing them was not possible, Frolaytia would have to approve the use of firearms.

At the same time, that would lead to the worst case scenario.

“Slaughtering 130,000 of the world’s upper class. This is going to cause a gigantic war.”

She felt like everything had been set up to lead that way, but then she shook her head.

She could only do what the situation allowed.

“Did you retrieve the semi-grenade launcher the man used?”

“Yes! It looks just like a Legitimacy Kingdom model, but it’s a copy. Someone might be trying to make it look like we set all this up!”

She could hear a metallic clattering over the radio.

Heivia may have been taking apart the gun and checking on the details.

“A few of the internal parts are made of plastic instead of metal. That’s something the Capitalist Corporations tend to do. It’s actually easier to use than ours.”

“The Capitalist Corporations? Not the Information Alliance?”

If their opponent was the Information Alliance, it was easy to imagine they would trigger a riot to get back at the Legitimacy Kingdom for taking Second Venice in a proper Object battle.

“I don’t know. It might be the Information Alliance pretending to be the Capitalist Corporations. Also, this is a spy’s paradise. The place is filled with VIPs from all four world powers, so the Capitalist

Corporations might be interfering to wear down the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Information Alliance so they can find an opening to take Second Venice for themselves."

"Understood. I'll give it some thought." Frolaytia slowly sighed. "And? If it's a copy of our grenade launcher, the option would be .45 caliber. How is Myonri's injury?"

"She was hit in the side, but her bulletproof plating worked against her. Instead of cleanly piercing her, the bullet is still inside her! So send a medical team right away!!"

"…"

She wanted to do just that.

But sending out a unit at the moment could easily unbalance the cup that was so full of water the surface tension was about to break. She could not doom the world to a fiery fate for a single soldier.

"Heivia, how many people are there with you?"

"It's really just me and the skinny boy. Please don't count Myonri! And what do we do about the little bikini devil? Although to be honest, she's probably the strongest one here!!"

"Understood. The three of you, not including Myonri, need to determine where the launcher came from. We're surrounded on all sides and can't send anyone out. Anything we do will be interpreted negatively and will stimulate the crowd, so find a justification. Once we know some other military was involved in the attack with the grenade launcher, this is a job for the military instead of the police. That means we have an excuse to head out."

"Wait! What about Myonri!?"

"Get to the bottom of this before the 37th's cutest soldier kicks the bucket. Fail and it's hara-kiri for the both of us!! Got that, Heivia!?"

Part 2

"I can't believe this…"

Heivia cursed the world on the south side of Second Venice.

Myonri was injured and unable to move, so they had carried her into a nearby building. They could not leave her exposed to the dirty rain with her deep wound and letting the civilians see a weakened soldier would cause problems. Most of the people were kind and harmless rich people who were creating makeshift grills and pizza ovens by cutting up the metal drums out front. (The drums were the kind used to hold industrial shipments of high-quality massage oil rather than petroleum.) However, it was worth being careful after what had happened.

Quenser followed Catherine's instructions to nervously apply pressure to the wound with scraps of cloth and just barely managed to stop Myonri's bleeding.

But the bullet was still inside her body.

If the transformed bullet had created a sharp protrusion a single fidget could damage a thick blood vessel. Not to mention that lead was toxic. Nothing good could come of having that inside her body for an extended period of time.



“Second Venice alone is twenty kilometers across. If we have to search Malta too, how wide a search area is that? And how many people? We’re not a detective from a mystery novel!!”

“I’m…fine.”

Myonri’s breathing was rapid and worryingly shallow and her sweaty face was pale, but she still managed to say that.

Except…

“I’m…fine… I’m a soldier too. I’m prepared for the worst. If things are really looking bad, at least get…my dog tags back…to my mom…”

“Shut up, Myonri!” roared Heivia. “If you’re only going to look at things negatively, then keep your mouth shut!!”

Quenser spoke calmly to his awful friend.

“Heivia, let’s do what we can.”

The noble boy seemed at a loss for words after that.

He had wanted to hear that, but it had not erased the problems facing them.

“But what can we do!? It might be easier to ignore that busty commander’s orders and find a boat. If we can break through and get to the maintenance base on Malta…”

“She said they’re surrounded, remember? We can’t get through the rioting crowds even if we do get to Malta and we’ll be shot if we approach without the authorization code. They’ll suspect we’re rioters who stole some uniforms. Plus, Catherine and I aren’t even in our uniforms.”

Quenser took Myonri’s weak hand and placed it on the scrap of cloth he had been pressing against her side.

“Whoever that grenade launcher bastard was, he normally would have hesitated if he was handed that powerful weapon. It wouldn’t have helped him any. He only took it because his frustrations had built up in this emergency. That means it wasn’t some pain-in-the-ass method like ordering the parts one-by-one off the internet. His ‘business partner’ handed him the completed product just a few hours ago.”

“But who was that? The Capitalist Corporations or the Information Alliance!?”

“I don’t know, but there is something that caught my attention.” Quenser licked his lips. “Second Venice was temporarily under our control. That means we were monitoring the cargo going in and out. …In that case, where did that grenade launcher come from?

What route was used to smuggle it in? We controlled the official entrances like the ports and airports, so whoever they were, their routes would have been limited. There can't have been that many. If we can narrow it down, we might be able to lie in wait for them."

The two idiots and Catherine Blueangel used their bloody hands to call up a map of Second Venice on a handheld device.

Tall buildings were arranged along a spider web of countless canals. They added Xs to the entrances being monitored by the Legitimacy Kingdom.

"It's hopeless. We've covered them all… Is there really a secret back entrance!?"

"Wait a second," said the little black bikini devil.

She pointed at a corner of the screen using a finger bloody from the first aid.

"There's a container yard here."

"Y-yeah. But Catherine, this north side port is being managed by the Legitimacy Kingdom too. If the launcher was carried in there, it would have been caught by an inspection."

"But there's another boat right next to the container yard. A floating restaurant. I believe it cooks up the fish the guests catch themselves. That means it heads out to sea."

Quenser immediately started moving.

"Let's contact our busty commander and have her look into who owns it."

"And if it's the Capitalist Corporations…"

"They might be fishing up some divers late at night. And if they use the neighboring containers to hide what they bring aboard, they can slip things into Second Venice."

This luxury resort was known as a spy's paradise because VIPs from the four world powers gathered here and forgot all about war. It was not at all surprising that a few contact points like this existed.

Finally, they received a reply over the radio.

“The owner’s name is Welshy Harpoon. As you were hoping, it belongs to a Capitalist Corporations conglomerate. But it looks like the boat capsized when the asteroid exploded in midair. Hurry to the north side container yard. We just need one piece of evidence. Then we can send in a unit to carry Myonri out on a stretcher and have the medics look after her. So go all out here. It’s the only way to live a life without regret.”

They knew what they had to do.

And it was no time to be worrying about forcing young Catherine to go along with it.

But if they all set out for that container yard, it would mean something else.

They would be leaving Myonri here.

“I swear.” Heivia spoke through his clenched teeth. “I swear we’ll be back. So don’t you die before then, Myonri.”

The girl did not respond.

She only smiled weakly.

And thus the bloody boys and girl returned to the hellish battlefield.

But this time they were not simply caught in the middle. They were on a mission to save their comrade in arms.

Part 3

When they left the building, it was still raining.

Black Bikini Catherine turned her palms up at waist height to wash away Myonri’s blood from providing first aid. The midair explosion of the asteroid and the collapse of the buildings had sent a lot of dust into the air. It intertwined with the water vapor in the sky to become the raindrops that poured down.

They walked behind the buildings to slip past the crowds out front. They did not want to be caught in a dispute with those frustrated

taxpayers. A lot of them had created makeshift torches by sticking torn pieces of their shirts in bottles of strong alcohol, but that was obviously just one step away from a Molotov cocktail.

“What about the transformers? If they shock us, we’ll more or less explode.”

“It’s pitch black around here, so the power must be out. I bet our busty commander shut it off to prevent any secondary damage.”

They had no time.

To travel from the south side to the north side, they stole two water scooters they found in a random canal. These had no sidecars, so Heivia boarded one and Catherine the other. Quenser was of course just ballast.

“Hop on, big brother.”

“I might as well.”

“If you say you want to get on mine, I’ll drive off without you,” warned Heivia.

“I said I’m getting on the other one!”

There were no streetlights or illuminated signs, so the journey through the late night waterways was quite thrilling. They were arranged as complexly as a spider web and the curves could be sharp in places. And thanks to the asteroid’s midair explosion, ships had sunk and concrete rubble had fallen in. If they did not keep their lights on and keep an eye out for anything sticking up from the surface, they would have run into something and sunk almost immediately.

“ ‘Enjoy some marine leisure activities with a friend.’ …Hee hee hee. That’s another stamp.”

“Am I your big brother or a friend?”

“You can be whatever I need you to be!”

Quenser decided being somewhat flexible was fine. He was supposed to be her instructor, but some of these tasks were a bit much for an Elite who had just been released from a sterile facility.

Also, the water scooter meant for adults was a little large for the

12-year-old girl, but she was far better at driving it than Heivia. If she had not cheerfully moved out ahead while swerving left and right, Heivia probably would have taken the wrong course and hit a hidden obstacle.

Quenser knew just enough about marine leisure activities to know he never wanted to drive down this obstacle course of a canal.

“Wow. I guess you really are a Pilot Elite…!”

Simply wrapping his arms around her felt insufficient, so he grabbed onto her tiny hips and spoke from the back seat.

“Hm? Speaking of Elites, what happened to the Princess?”

“The round body is all bent up, but it didn’t explode,” said Catherine. “I think inside the Object is the safest place. And firing anti-air lasers into the empty sky is one thing, but we probably can’t expect much support while in the city.”

“Is that how it works…?”

“And stop thinking of some other girl when you look at me. That’s getting kind of rude. Hmph!”

He tried contacting the Princess by radio just to be sure and he got through just fine.

“You look like an orange someone stepped on, but I’m glad to see the communications infrastructure is still running.”

“Of course it is,” she replied. “Are you trying to pick a fight or motivate me?”

The Princess’s voice was flat but prickly, like she was irritated after her favorite dress had caught on a nail in the wall.

“I heard Myonri was shot.”

“Yeah. We’re busy searching for whoever was behind it.”

“Tell me if there’s anything I can do. I can’t move right now, but I can still act as a stationary gun platform. Mark your targets and I can blow them all away.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Do that while we’re searching for evidence and we’ll have nothing but ashes left. Besides, you wouldn’t be firing

your lasers in the clean air of the higher altitudes. This is a straight shot from south to north. Your accuracy has got to drop with a curved shot over twenty kilometers and that just scares me."

The nighttime canal was dangerous with all the wreckage and rubble sunk in it, so they did not pass any other boats on the way. It did not take them long to drive straight to the north side container yard.

"I'm afraid to get any closer. I feel like they'd hear us."

"If we had a kayak we could probably approach silently."

"In this dark canal full of rubble? We'd be noisily bumping into things all over the place."

They stopped the water scooters a short distance away and climbed onto a nearby walkway.

"Okay. 'Take a trip with a friend." …That's yet another stamp."

"More importantly…"

The container yard was more than a hundred meters away, but it still looked like a dark mountain. That was just how many metal containers were piled up.

"There's got to be five or six hundred in all. It would take months to open them all up and do a thorough check inside."

"We just need to find some evidence of wrongdoing, so we can check something other than the containers."

"?"

"The video archive for the security cameras. They need some kind of trick to sneak their secret cargo from the floating restaurant and mix it in with the containers. We don't need something physical. Steal the data from the control room and Frolaytia can act."

"Let's do that. Oh, but we can't steal the data with the power out."

"What if we swipe the whole hard disk and have it investigated after the fact?"

"By the way, big brother." Black Bikini Catherine tilted her head. "Are there people I can and can't shoot this time?"

Quenser gulped a little, but…

“No, you should be fine this time.”

Surprisingly, it was Heivia who answered. He was peering at the pile of containers through his rifle’s scope.

“The entire city was tossed around by that asteroid explosion, but there are still armed guards making normal patrols. That would make nice camouflage normally, but it really stands out now. That’s the problem with having only one plan.”

“Wasn’t the Legitimacy Kingdom managing that port?”

“Officially, yeah. But we don’t have the personnel to staff all of the facilities. We send one of our people to take the top position and leave the patrols to the licensed locals. And from the looks of things, that top position is skipping out on his work somewhere.”

“In other words, those guards are only pretending to be Information Alliance port security…?”

“They’re Capitalist Corporations spies. Since they’re professional enemies, we can shoot them all. It’s time for the fireworks show.”

Part 4

A girl dangled from a cliff by a single rope in the late night rain.

She was the Pilot Elite of the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion, aka the Princess. And the cliff she dangled from was known as the Baby Magnum. The badly damaged Object was floating in the ocean, but no scaffolding had been built around it and no maintenance soldiers were working on it. She had been told over the radio that the technicians had been sent out to build quick residences to hold the many civilians, so no one could be spared for her yet.

(I just hope that awful Rush doesn’t try anything during this lag.)

“There we go.”

The Princess had changed into a blue bikini. She had her feet on the armor panels to balance herself with the single rope, so she ended up sticking her small butt out behind her. She of course had a work belt around her waist and it held a radio, so she could return to the cockpit on a moment's notice.

(We were supposed to get some free time after dealing with the Supernova. Frolaytia apparently wanted to keep that as a surprise for Quenser and the others, but now that's all ruined.)

"Yes. Anything but a bikini isn't even an option."

With that comment, she checked on the area illuminated by the penlight stuck above her ear.

(The main cannon joint took a lot of damage too. I wonder how bad the marine floats were hit. At least the compound eyes of radars and sensors were all attached to their own cannons.)

Even if the Princess grabbed some tools in slender arms and fought the damaged components, she could not fix the Baby Magnum. But if she finished surveying the damage before the maintenance soldiers arrived, she could save them a lot of work.

And in addition to any logical reasons, she may have been doing this as a way to make up for the guilt she felt.

(I'm the only one with power, water, and food. Not that I can output the reactor's electricity in accordance with civilians standards.)

She pulled a hammer and micro-mic from the emergency tool set wrapped around her waist as a belt and she tapped lightly for a test. She immediately grimaced. The reverberation she heard was powerful. Onion armor was made to absorb any impacts with a spring like motion using the multiple armor panels layered like mille-feuille, so it was not supposed to sound like that.

(It must have been crushed while still bent.)

Even the zones that looked fine had several spots that were not functioning. If she was hit with a main cannon there, it would all be over. The impact would barely be absorbed and the attack would pierce right on through.

With her slender body exposed to the rain, the Princess calmly

thought to herself while wiggling her small butt behind her.

(The engine room's reactor is still responding properly, so I thought I might be able to get past the damage and start moving again, but I guess that would be too dangerous.)

At any rate, modern wars were all about Objects.

The future did not look bright for a battalion that had lost theirs.

Part 5

"Well, that was a disaster…"

A voice entered the darkness.

It was inside a small single-story control room in the north side container yard. It was like an office carelessly built for a construction site. In there, someone was shivering and filling their cup noodles with water boiled on a portable stove. She was a soaking wet girl of about twelve. She had flowing blonde hair and cold eyes. She was surrounded by a sharp, completed aura never found in other girls her age. Shockingly, she was a mercenary.

She muttered under her breath with her hair wet.

"Since I was taking some time off, I came here thinking I could eat a ton of tasty lobster, but I certainly didn't expect the entire boat to suddenly capsize!! An asteroid strike? Sure, the cook I used is a mole who sells us information, but have I really done anything worth being trapped in a ship that could begin sinking at any moment for two hours!?"

A large dark-skinned man answered her with exasperation in his voice.

"Shouldn't you count yourself lucky you survived at all?"

"You're the bodyguard I hired with my own money, so try to show a little more customer service. …And what is this getup!? I can't move very well in dress and a wide-brimmed hat and could you at least choose something that's more my style!?"

“Second Venice is a luxury resort island. Please understand that it’s hard to find anything your size that’s *not* meant for rich little girls.”

The girl complained, but the outfit suited her fine, white skin and long, flowing blonde hair quite well. The only flaw was a heart that enjoyed the smell of gunpowder and gun oil more than tea and roses.

“Complain all you want, but I can only assume you’re completely fine when you get that excited over some cup noodles.”

“Shut up. This is a Pavlovian response I’ve imprinted on myself. Whenever I want to force myself into a good mood, I go for some Island Nation cup noodles. By this point, just pouring in the boiling water is enough to fill my heart with happiness. It’s a battlefield luxury that helps me reflect on how hard it was to make it this far. When it comes to portable foods, the Island Nation can’t be beat. It makes me so glad I was born in the Capitalist Corporations.”

“That’s the problem with you. You need to learn how to spend money instead of just making it.”

“Are you sure you should be saying that? I’ll confiscate your share of the pork and your egg. So you put them in after letting the noodles cook?”

“Let’s not go crazy here!”

“Hey! What kind of bodyguard grabs at his client!? Buy your own food!!”

But as they argued, they were cut off by several gunshots in a row.

Ducking down or getting on the floor may have been the normal reactions, but the girl and the man did not seem to care.

The large dark-skinned man glanced at his military wristwatch.

“It’s time.”

“It’s hard to believe they can pull off this level of quality in only three minutes. Island Nation technology is frightening indeed. Oh, right. If you’re just going to throw out the cover, give it to me. Each month, you can paste five of them to a postcard and send it in for a present.”

“You’re using the expensive airmail for that!? And you’re sending them to the mysterious and mystical Island Nation!?”

“Are you stupid? I also have a chance of winning the special prize: 100 meals’ worth of cup noodles. That’s 100 authentic ‘Made in Island Nation’ meals on the battlefield. Now that’s a luxury worth killing for!”

After peeling off the cover, she checked on the egg she had dropped inside, stuck in a few pieces of pre-packaged pork, stirred it all around with a fork, and spun all the noodles around on the fork.

As a Westerner, she did not audibly slurp the noodles.

Even as they rapidly worked at their meal, they could hear gunshots here and there.

It did not sound like they had time to drink the soup, so the blonde girl sadly thought about the egg yolk that had broken earlier.

After shaking off her regret, the girl in a wide-brimmed hat and fancy dress held a hand out toward the large dark-skinned man.

“Hand me that rifle.”

“Mariydi, I’m supposed to be your bodyguard.”

Part 6

After arriving on the north side, Quenser, Heivia, and Catherine did not kick down the port’s front gate and go in guns blazing.

“Hey, our guns don’t have any expensive suppressors on them. Fire once and it’ll be like poking at the hornet’s nest. How do we get inside?”

“We’ll have to look for something else we can use. …Oh.”

After climbing onto land from the water scooters stopped in the canal, Quenser looked around.

“There we go. There’s a ton of stuff mixed in with the rubble. Hm, a

dog whistle? Did some VIP abandon a war to take an overseas trip with his toy-like indoor dog? In that case…"

"Big brother, what are you doing? If you're cleaning up the trash, let me do it so I can get a stamp."

The boy continued rummaging and digging through the rubble until he found a cylindrical container about as thick as a human arm. It looked something like an Island Nation diploma case or a somewhat skinny thermos.

But it was neither of those.

"You can really tell Second Venice is full of the world's wealthy. Their bond cases are made of tungsten steel. Look at this logo. It's the same series as those bomb-resistant safes. We can use this."

"Hey, what are you trying to do with that junk? Even if the Capitalist Corporations are all about money, they're not going to be our friends just because we sell them some scrap metal."

"That's not what this is for."

Quenser pulled a thick wire out from below the concrete and wrapped it around the cylindrical container as he answered.

"Heivia, what is it I'm carrying around despite all the rain?"

"Hm? Hand Axe plastic explosives, right? …Hold on. You aren't planning to use a bomb when we're trying to be silent, are you!?"

"That's exactly what I'm planning to do."

Idiot #1 gathered a few thin steel panels.

"I'll use explosives to silently take them out. And I'll tell you how."

With his handmade gathering of junk, he stuffed a fingertip-sized piece of Hand Axe in the cylindrical container with an electric fuse stabbed into it. Then he closed the lid. He ran through the pouring rain while ducking down and holding the container in his hands.

"When you get down to it, explosions are nothing more than a rapid expansion of volume. With this explosive, a fist-sized mass will produce lots of flammable gas which instantly expands a hundred or thousand-fold. The power of that pushing out is what destroys things."

“Get to the point.”

“Explosions have a direction to them. Seal one in a sturdy closed container like this and the rapidly expanding blast has nowhere to go. This thing is made to withstand explosions, so it can’t break through the side. So what happens if I carefully open a single hole with this hand drill?”

The dark container yard was large and had multiple entrances.

They focused on a small employee gate that was relatively inconspicuous. They hid behind a crushed crepe stand located about fifty meters away.

“Big brother, there are guards there.”

“Yeah, but fewer than anywhere else,” said Quenser with the cylindrical container resting on his shoulder like a bazooka. “I’ve sealed the blast inside and given it a single small hole to escape. For the finishing touch, let’s attach this dog whistle. It works on a frequency too high for human ears, but even if we can’t hear it, it still exists. If we fire out the flammable gases using the explosive, we can create a silent blast that human lungs could never hope to match. I’m worried about the sturdiness of the dog whistle, but if I surround it in steel panels like a trumpet to direct the ultrasonic waves in a single direction, what do you think will happen?”

There was no flashy effect.

There was no light or sound.

Or at least none that could be detected by Heivia and Catherine’s human senses.

“Kh.”

But after they heard a quiet metallic click, the soldier standing guard fifty meters away collapsed face-first into a puddle. The soldier next to him had to be baffled. Was the first soldier playing around, was he sleep deprived, or was he sick? With no light, sound, or noticeable injuries, the second soldier could not immediately determine this was an enemy attack. And before he could place a hand on his fallen comrade’s shoulder, Quenser opened the metal container’s lid, tore off another piece of Hand Axe, and tossed it inside.

After another small click, the other guard was silenced too.

“Man, you can really feel it vibrating in your hands. Heivia, tell me what path to take. We need to settle this before those two miss a scheduled check in.”

“Y-yeah. That thing scares me. Are our ears going to be all right?”

“It’s not the ears. It’s shaking their skulls to give them a concussion. And as long as you stay behind me, it won’t affect you. The trumpet of steel panels is directing the ultrasonic waves forward.”

The dark container yard was large and quite a few soldiers were stationed there as guards. No amount of work would allow them to arrive at the control room without running across any of them.

“That doesn’t have a sight, so how do you aim?” asked Catherine.

“You don’t have to be very accurate. It’s like a shotgun or like hitting them with a flashlight’s beam.”

While quietly conversing, they stepped over the collapsed guards and entered the container yard.

“Does this count as ‘go on a test of courage with everyone’?”

“Catherine, nothing counts during a life-or-death battle.”

They had a map on their handheld devices, so they knew the general layout of the container yard. That told them the distance from this gate to the control room.

But…

“Damn. It doesn’t tell us the details of how the containers are piled up. It’s like a labyrinth in here… It reminds me of the killing house back during training.”

Heivia dealt with the unexpected situation by pointing his rifle all around.

The rain poured on the piles of metal containers that caused all sounds to echo complexly around. Even so, he accurately located the footsteps of someone else. He raised one hand and Quenser silently stepped forward with the metal tube on his shoulder. Before they were noticed, he leaned out from behind the containers and aimed the silent ultrasonic skull shaker.

The usual small click followed.

But then something odd happened.

Quenser, Heivia, and Catherine felt something invisible scratching at their heads.

“(…!! Que-…you!?)”

“(The sonic spear hit a nearby container wall and reflected back at us. But the guards are down.)”

Quenser leaned against a nearby container to at least avoid collapsing, but then his shoulder bumped into something.

He looked over and spotted a metal ladder.

“…Uh, oh.”

He looked up and saw the ladder continued up to the top of the square metal container. But there was more than just the one. They climbed vertically to the top of the pyramid-like stacks of containers and they stretched horizontally between stacks of containers. It was all too apparent that this was a path. The soldiers’ patrol route was not just two-dimensional. It crisscrossed in three dimensions!

And then a dark figure’s face poked out from the top of the container overhead.

Quenser quickly opened the cylindrical container and tossed some Hand Axe in, but the enemy noticed something was up and raised his carbine much faster.

Two harsh gunshots burst through the curtain of pouring rain.

Quenser had ducked down on reflex, but he felt no pain or shock.

The enemy soldier up above had not been the one to fire. Heivia had fired his assault rifle and now he dragged down the guard.

“Dammit.”

“Not bad.”

Heivia cursed after his perfectly accurate shots and Catherine cheerfully complimented him.

Then everything changed.

The late night container yard was filled with explosive sounds more intense than thunder. Heivia wielded his assault rifle, Catherine had been given his large handgun, and Quenser still had his silent ultrasonic skull shaker. It was better than nothing and it added in an unknown weapon that operated under different rules, so it helped confuse the enemy. With such a bad numerical disadvantage, they would have been overwhelmed in no time without something like that.

“We’re completely outnumbered!!”

“But after all the blood Myonri lost, we can’t fall back and try again later. We have to push on through!!”

They had to use the metal containers for cover. They at least managed to avoid being exposed to crossfire from multiple angles and changed position each time they heard footsteps or gunfire.

They of course used the assault rifle and handgun, but when the containers were only stacked one or two high, Quenser would ball up some Hand Axe plastic explosive, stab in an electric fuse, toss it over the pile, and blow up the enemy soldiers hiding on the other side.

“Ugh. I’m the one doing it, but I really don’t want to peek on the other side.”

“That just means you’re normal. No one wants to check the bottom of their slipper after swatting a roach.”

They continued through the labyrinth of containers to reach the control room with the data they needed.

Or they tried to.

Something changed suddenly. And not in a good way.

“?”

Quenser looked up when he heard what sounded like a large construction arm moving.

Then his eyes widened.

“Oh, shit.”

A gantry crane as tall as a small clock tower had moved directly above them. Something like a crane game dangled down and its mechanical claws fit perfectly into the holes in a metal container.

Yes.

It was taking away the metal container that was shielding them from the bullets.

“Oh, shit! Oh, shit! Oh, shit! We’re screwed if it lifts that up!!”

“This way, big brother!!”

Catherine’s small hand grabbed Quenser’s arm and they dove between some other containers. Left behind, Heivia glanced around and slipped into hiding in the opposite direction.

A moment later, the container was entirely lifted up and light machinegun fire swept through the air.

If they had remained there just five seconds longer, they would have been turned to mincemeat.

“Dammit. Why does the crane still have power?”

“They might have their own backup power to protect the transportation infrastructure during an emergency,” explained Catherine. “Like a gas turbine.”

But it was too soon to relax.

They giant crane could easily do more than just lift up the heavy metal container. If it could do that, it could also do the opposite.

In other words, drop it.

“Heivi-…!?”

Quenser realized that, but he did not have time to give a warning.

The impact was so heavy it brought a cold sensation to his stomach.

“We can’t stay here. Let’s keep going, big brother.”

“…”

“Big brother!”

“O-okay…! He’s okay, right? Heivia rolled to the other side of the container right before it fell, right? That’s why we can’t see him, right!?”

“We can’t tell one way or the other now, so we have to wait until later to find an answer! C’mon!!”

The gunfire continued sporadically, so they could not stay put for long. And some of that gunfire was not directly targeting them. That suggested the enemy had yet to finish off their target. Quenser wanted to assume that meant Heivia was still fighting on the other side of that container.

That was when he heard the disconcerting whine of the arm moving.

The four thick wires and the mechanical claws lifted up another metal container. Quenser was watching it in a daze, so Catherine pulled on his hand and slipped through the slight gap between piles of containers.

Even if the metal container was dropped from above, the gap was too narrow and it could not crush them.

…Except the gantry crane ignored that.

It gathered momentum like a pendulum and slammed the metal container against the actual pyramid of similar containers. The large pile collapsed and erased their previous safe zone.

“What is this, a falling block puzzle game!?”

They ran as fast as they could and somehow managed to outrun the collapse.

“Big brother, we need to do something about that haunted crane!”

“The gantry crane’s controls are several dozen meters up. And firing a rifle at it isn’t going to stop it!!”

Quenser held an ultrasonic weapon, but it directly rattled the target’s skull with invisible waves and would be useless here. It could not reach the person sitting at the controls inside the box of reinforced glass.

But with her large handgun in hand, Black Bikini Catherine rejected

that idea at a more fundamental level.

“No. There’s no one at the controls. It’s probably being remotely controlled.”

“Then there’s even less we can do…Nonlethal ultrasonic waves and a handgun can’t destroy that thing!”

He could always throw some Hand Axe directly at it, but he could not throw it as far vertically as he could horizontally. Even if he balled up the plastic explosive like a baseball, his arm was not powerful enough to reach the crane’s controls. He could also end up having his own bomb fall right down on top of him.

“Is there any way to destroy the crane other than the controls?” asked Catherine.

“…”

The gantry crane was entirely different from a mobile crane or the kind placed on the roof when constructing a building. Instead of a single arm swinging on a fixed point, a metal tower several dozen meters tall had metal wheels several times the size of a train’s that it used to move along some rails on the ground.

In other words…

“If we destroy the wheels or the rails, would the crane derail and fall over?”

“…”

Catherine Blueangel leaned out from behind the container and fired her handgun several times at the giant metal wheels.

It was said that gun could blow a fist-sized hole in an elephant, but all it did was scatter orange sparks.

“No good. This isn’t enough firepower. Big brother, will your bombs work?”

“With something that heavy, I’m not sure. Plus, they’re moving back and forth. I don’t want to get close to set up the bomb. I’d get my hand caught and crushed!”

“…”

The black bikini gun girl thought for a moment.

“Then the only way to protect you is to take out whoever’s controlling it remotely.”

“Catherine?”

He did not have time to stop her.

He heard a few light footsteps and the 12-year-old braid girl vanished. She had not made a quick horizontal movement. She had moved vertically. She had climbed to the top of the metal container in no time and he had not been able to follow the unexpected action.

But by the time he realized that, it was all over.

He could not call out to the small girl, so he remained crouched in the rainy late night container yard and spoke in a pointlessly quiet voice.

“Dammit, Catherine.”

Part 7

1: The enemy knew almost exactly where they were. Otherwise they would not be able to remove the metal containers that acted as a shield, drop those containers from above, or knock over entire stacks of containers. They could not afford to hit their own allies with those broad attacks, so they had to be in a position giving a view of the entire battlefield.

2: The enemy had not ben viewing the entire container yard with a satellite or UAV from the beginning. If they had, they would have immediately noticed something was amiss no matter how silently Quenser took out the guards. Most likely, they had quickly climbed to the top of the containers to gain a decent vantage point only after noticing the trouble.

3: The enemy could not let go of their mobile device. They were constantly controlling the gantry crane remotely, so that went without saying.

With the above three points in mind, Catherine Blueangel ran from container stack to container stack. She did not stop and then climb vertically like a mountain climber or cliff climber. It was like an extension of running. She would build up speed, jump, grab the edge of the container's roof, kick off of the slight protrusions on the wall, and roll onto the higher level with her speed intact. It was a lot like an urban extreme sport.

Of course, she found several dark figures on top of the containers.

Elevated places were perfect for sniping.

With harsh gunshots, she knocked them down to the ground below and clicked her tongue.

(Those were normal snipers. My target is elsewhere.)

At that point, the gantry crane rumbled overhead.

A heavy metal container dangled from it and it swung like an Island Nation temple bell to knock down the entire stack of containers on which Catherine stood.

"Kh."

The 12-year-old girl jumped down one level and ran toward the metal ladder horizontally connecting this stack to another. Meanwhile, a powerful impact caused the entire stack to crumble. Each block weighed more than ten tons, so if a corner slightly grazed her, it could tear off an arm or a leg.

She more leaped than ran across the ladder and escaped to the other stack.

A few seconds later, the first stack completely collapsed.

(They resorted to the crane, so I must be headed in the right direction!)

The gantry crane began to move again.

The four wires and mechanical claws connected to a nearby container. It looked like the enemy intended to slam it directly into her, but unlike the earlier surprise attack, she had seen this attack before. Catherine did not panic or rush as she took a running start and jumped on top of the dangling container.

Then she continued forward without slowing down.

(If they're using a mobile device, the backlight has to always be shining on their face. Telling them apart from the other soldiers is easy!!)

She fired her military handgun a few times to take out a few snipers on other stacks.

She ran across the large container for a ten meter running start and then leaped across the dark container yard.

She flew in a gentle arc.

Time seemed to slow for everyone who saw it.

Then the 12-year-old braid girl accurately landed on the top of another container stack with feline grace.

The mobile user was right in front of her.

Surprisingly, it was a girl with long blonde hair who looked the same age as Catherine. She wore an elegant dress and wide-brimmed hat, but it was obvious at a glance that she was the same. Thanks to the rain, her bodylines and even the bright color of her skin showed through the dress. She was too lithely muscular and her frame was too solid for a high-class girl visiting a luxury resort.



“!!”

“!?”

Catherine aimed her military handgun with one hand, but the mobile user flipped her soaked skirt around and kicked the gun to the side while showing off her legs up to the base of the thighs. The mobile user carried an assault rifle, but with the mobile device taking up one hand, she must not have been able to make proper

use of the rifle and its heavy recoil. She tried to hold it like a light, but it was no use. During that brief moment of hesitation, Catherine grabbed the rifle, twisted it out of the other girl's grasp, and threw it down off of the container.

They were both unarmed now.

Their fists and legs crossed paths a few times and they took a simultaneous step back.

Aware of a stinging pain in the back of her hand, Catherine took another look at the strange mobile user whose skirt fluttered like a matador's cape.

"You have the scent of an Elite. But there's something different about you. And your fighting style isn't that of the clean wars."

"Sorry, but I'm a freak created by the Object-less Northern Restricted Zone. And I hate proper Elites. Honestly, we use the same techniques, so why do you get paid so much more!?"

Part 8

"You damn monsters…" groaned Quenser down in the world below.

He was holding his handmade ultrasonic skull shaker like a bazooka, but he could not aim with any precision. Just like shining a flashlight on someone, he aimed in his target's general direction to knock out everyone there, so even if he aimed at the girls moving around with such great speed, he might harm Catherine too.

And the same was likely true of the Capitalist Corporations soldiers even though their sniper rifles were specifically designed to pierce a single point.

No one could interfere. They could not protect their side of the two girls fighting hand-to-hand. Every one of their movements was too acrobatic to predict, so there was no way to safely eliminate just the enemy. Catherine knew she was outnumbered, so she was likely sticking close to the Capitalist Corporations mobile user to create just such a situation.

And the idiot had to hold his head in his hands.

“*Her* skirt keeps fluttering up and *her* bikini is about to come undone!! If you’re going to take this oddly seriously, can’t you focus on that kind of threat too!?”

It was like watching two cats in heat fighting as they jumped from rooftop to rooftop.

But Quenser could not afford to just sit there and watch the catfight between 12-year-old girls.

They were outnumbered.

Quenser’s side knew that, but the Capitalist Corporations might not. They had only taken a look at the whole container yard after the trouble had begun, so it was possible they did not know that Quenser, Catherine, and Heivia were the only ones attacking. There was a good chance they would suspect those three were scouts and a large unit was waiting outside the container yard.

And Quenser’s side needed them to think that.

Now that a largescale firefight had broken out, Quenser’s side could not win if the Capitalist Corporations regained their cool.

(I guess bluffs work better during this kind of confusion.)

Before the waves of confusion could settle down, he wanted to overwrite that with an even more impactful attack. He wanted an attack large enough to surpass the limits of their hearts and drive them into a panicked flight. The best way to do that would be to take out the Capitalist Corporations’ landmark, the weapon key to their strategy, and the support for their psyches. What would that be? Setting aside how realistic it was, he knew the answer.

(The gantry crane. I guess I have to break that thing after all, dammit!!)

He had to destroy their largest weapon to drive them all back. He may have reached that specific answer due to his position as someone who went around destroying Objects to reject the clean wars.

At any rate, he made his way toward the bottom of the gantry crane that ran along the thick rails installed on the asphalt road.

As previously stated, the gantry crane was not like rooftop construction cranes or mobile cranes. Instead of fixing itself in place and rotating from there, a tower several dozen meters tall used metal wheels larger than a train's to travel along a set of rails. Even if the rails ran front to back, the crane itself could only move side to side. Those two directions of movement meant the containers could only be moved along a cross-like path, so it was a lot like a crane game.

Meaning…

"It would be fastest to destroy the rail or wheels."

He spoke the idea aloud because he was not confident he could actually do it.

If he could destroy one of the metal wheels or destroy a rail to derail the wheels, the giant gantry crane would be unable to support its own weight and collapse. But that first step was no easy task. Those thick metal wheels were designed to easily support a metal tower that weighed over a hundred tons, so attaching a bomb and detonating it would barely affect them.

The rails were the same. The gantry crane's rails were embedded in the ground like at a railroad crossing, but stuffing a clay bomb in there and detonating it would not bend them. The explosive could break through a normal steel beam, but it took a lot of work to set up. The explosive had to be attached to the top of one end and the bottom of the other end to bend the beam in an S-shape and break it. That kind of work was hard to do when the rails were embedded in the asphalt.

(I've heard a train can be derailed if a crow places a small stone on the rail.)

He thought for a bit but rejected that idea too. The gantry crane's weight was simply too great. Not only was the overall weight an issue, but the burden on each individual wheel was entirely different. Those heavy and slow-moving wheels would crush just about anything in their path. If he placed a bicycle or scooter along the rails, it would be smashed to pieces. Even if he used an explosive blast to knock a metal container on top of the rails, the crane would simply push it forward as it moved.

"What do I do?"

He could not destroy the wheels or the rails with his explosives.

He could not derail it with an obstacle.

“What do I do, dammit!?”

Quenser ran toward the giant wheels that were rumbling back and forth along the rails. Unlike a car, they could only follow that set path, so he did not have to worry about being hit unless he stepped on the rails. Even so, he felt a squeezing in his stomach as that great mass approached.

For the time being, he did not need the metal tube on his shoulder. He crouched down, placed it on the ground, and pulled some Hand Axe from his backpack. He kneaded the clay explosive again and again and desperately tried to figure out what to do with it.

“…”

After slowly breathing in and out, he stabbed an electric fuse into the bomb.

He had settled on a plan.

And at that very moment, he heard deafening gunfire from directly behind him. At the same time, orange sparks flew from the thick metal at the base of the gantry crane tower. Quenser quickly ducked down, but it did not help much.

Scorching pain surged through his shoulder and he fell to the ground.

“Ghhh…!!”

“Sorry, I meant that as a warning, but a ricochet hit you.”

A disconcerting sweat much too thick to be mistaken for rainwater oozed out from below Quenser’s skin as he looked around from the ground.

He saw a large dark-skinned man holding what appeared to be a Capitalist Corporations assault rifle. However, he seemed somehow different from the container yard soldiers. He was not disguised as port security and he was already fully equipped for urban warfare.

“This was unfortunate for both of us. I’m betting you were trying to sabotage the crane, but no handheld explosives would be enough

for that."

"Who…are you?"

"I'm from the money-obsessed Capitalist Corporations, so I prefer to take the enemy hostage than kill them. Spies are especially nice. I'll send you back to your unit and they'll send me a little spending money."

"…"

"Get up. You're on top of the rail. I doubt being slowly bisected would be much fun."

"…No, I'm fine right where I am."

Quenser held a radio in his hand.

And a short distance away, some clay Hand Axe explosive was stuffed into the rail's indentation in the asphalt.

The dark-skinned man was not too bothered by that. Even if it did detonate, it could not destroy the wheels or rail. The gantry crane would remain standing, so the boy's resistance was futile.

But the student had not set his hopes that high.

He could not destroy the rails or wheels with his explosives.

Derailing the crane with an obstacle was not realistic.

His situation looked hopeless, but he could not let the magic of his own words fool him. If he rationally compared the two options and chose only the workable aspects of both, another possibility showed itself.

In other words, he could use the explosive to lift up the crane and derail it.

The explosion sounded muffled, but that was to be expected when it had occurred just as the metal wheel interlocked with the rail while the clay explosive was between them, like a giant smashing herbs below its feet. The blast had nowhere to go, so it lifted up the giant wheel ever so slightly.

And that led to something that should not have happened.

The top of the solid and unshakable gantry crane tower shook somewhat.

When the dark-skinned man gave it a second look, he saw some slight space between the wheel and the indented rail.

No.

No…!!

“Tch!!”

“Shoot me if you like, but don’t let that detour delay you too much! When that crane falls, no one can predict how the containers will collapse!!”

“Goddammit!! Mariydi!!”

When he saw the wheel rising up even further, the dark-skinned man seemed to make up his mind. He removed his rifle’s sight from Quenser and ran off somewhere as fast as he could.

The gantry crane could not regain its balance now.

It was going to collapse.

“Farewell, Babel. Welcome to the age of war.”

Quenser gently smiled on the ground and then the world was smashed to pieces around him.

Part 9

“Oh.” In her blue bikini, the Princess continued inspecting her Object with tools in hand near the top of the Baby Magnum. She regained her balance after a slight tremor belatedly ran through the machine. The small butt contained in the synthetic fabric shook back and forth like she was surfing.

She was fifty meters up, but during the late-night downpour, she could not see the distant tower of dust.

However, her ample experience in war allowed her to intuitively

analyze the tremor she felt. The waves running through the dark sea were not normal. They were clearly manmade and had the dangerous and weighty feel of destruction.

She had heard that Quenser and the others were the attackers and the Capitalist Corporations were the defenders, so it was obvious what something this large meant.

“Way to go, Quenser.”

Part 10

The tower-like gantry crane collapsed to the side and the stacks of metal containers crumbled one after another like the remains of a sand castle. The snipers and spotters were swallowed up, the soldiers on the ground below fled in a panic, and pandemonium enveloped the entire area.

Dry gunshots hurried them along. The Legitimacy Kingdom intruders were probably firing at their backs with a rifle.

Their landmark and strategic foundation had been destroyed, that had filled them with fear, and now bullets were flying their way.

“Dammit,” cursed a blonde girl as she tore off her elegant dress’s skirt because it was in the way after absorbing so much water.

When she looked down from the top of a partially-fallen stack of containers, she saw only one enemy firing. He could be quickly suppressed if the soldiers calmly surrounded him, but Mariydi only knew that because she could see the giant labyrinth from above. The collapsing containers had created chaos and the enemy’s gunshots echoed off the metal walls again and again.

After three or four days of little sleep on a chaotic battlefield, it was fairly common for a soldier to confuse their allies for the enemy and fire on the people providing covering fire behind them. The collapse of the gantry crane had created similar chaos here.

The Pilot Elite with a black bikini and a blonde braid waved her right hand and spoke with a daring smile on her lips.

“Looks like my big brother’s friend is working hard. I win this time. And if you want to stubbornly blame your clothes, then strip naked and try again.”

“I wouldn’t act so confidently if I were you. Your swimsuit bottom’s knots are looking pretty tight.”

“Ah!?”

“And both sides too. After soaking up all that water, you’ll have to cut those with a knife to undo them. But who are you going to ask? This isn’t like the string to a boy’s swim trunks.”

“Gh…kh… B-but I still have the upper hand here. Looks like the Capitalist Corporations will have to abandon one of their bases. You should get out of here soon too.”

“…”

“A Capitalist Corporations mercenary should know to do what’s most sensible. A cruel fate awaits soldiers who are left behind on the battlefield. Especially for soldiers with an ‘abnormal background’ like us.”

“From the look of things, this wasn’t an official mission. Why did you break away from the military hierarchy for this reckless attack?”

“To find the source of the grenade launcher used by a rioter, but that isn’t the real reason. One of our comrades was shot and can’t move. This was a necessary step to get her back to the base zone as soon as possible.”

Mariydi sighed.

She reached into her pocket and flicked a scrap of paper over. The paper rotated like a frisbee and seemed to be some kind of contest entry card.

Catherine looked confused after catching it.

“What is this?”

“You don’t know? The cover sticker on there is for the mysterious mixed seafood and chicken flavor from the culture of *dashi*. It’s only sold within the Island Nation, so it wasn’t easy getting my hands on

it. And of course, only someone from the Capitalist Corporations could do so."

"I see. So it proves that the Capitalist Corporations had taken over this container yard."

"Even if one of our retreating soldiers fires a rocket at the control room and destroys the computers, you still have some kind of material evidence. Are you satisfied now?"

They had a deal.

Mariydi stepped back and Catherine did not try to pursue her any further.

The Capitalist Corporations mercenary said one last thing in the rain.

"You were wondering why we passed a launcher on to a rioter, weren't you?"

"?"

"Is the system in place across Second Venice really safe? Or would destroying it be the only way to achieve safety? And with that, goodbye."

As soon as the small figure jumped down from the container, the container shook below Catherine's feet. She too escaped that higher level to avoid being caught in the collapse.

Part 11

Quenser, Catherine, and Heivia managed to regroup. The evidence they had found allowed the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion to act swiftly.

As soon as the report came in, armored vehicles and military helicopters left the maintenance base zone on Malta.

"I repeat! We have received word that locals supplied with weapons by the Capitalist Corporations have mixed in with the harmless

evacuees. Therefore, we will be searching everyone's possessions to prove your innocence. Please obey the instructions of the powered suit unit. And a warning to the culprits! Your copied anti-personnel grenades will have no effect on our armored weapons!! If you do not fire, you will remain a normal citizen, but once you fire for any reason, you will be recorded as a local saboteur! This is your final chance, so please follow our instructions!!"

When Quenser and Heivia returned to the south side where badly injured Myonri waited, they ran to the roof of the building, lit colorful smoke bombs, and waved them through the rainy sky. There was no heliport there, but a transport helicopter still descended.

They did not need to return to base.

A medic and an old military doctor disembarked onto the rooftop.

"Can the injured be carried up here? The back of the helicopter can be sterilized and isolated for field surgery. It will be enough to extract the bullet and provide a blood transfusion."

"Thank god. And I mean it. I'm going to let that busty commander step all over me later on. This way!!"

"I was hit in the shoulder by a ricocheting bullet, so could you remove that after you're finished with Myonri?"

Their busy time was over.

They could not let the 130,000 normal citizens inside the maintenance base zone. Even if it meant delaying the construction of temporary residences, they had to build some roofs around the base to keep out the rain. Everyone was put to work on that. All of the spare materials used (along with the more than one hundred giant vehicles) to construct the maintenance base were dragged out, the usable pieces were gathered from the rubble in the city, and it was all combined as best as they could manage.

In what felt like no time at all, the sun rose high in the sky and then sank back down.

As Heivia had predicted, the Legitimacy Kingdom had begun releasing its rations to the normal citizens. Either way, a large transport ship full of supplies would be arriving soon. Being freed from the unease about the immediate future meant a lot. If they had

failed in that, those 130,000 people might have transformed into a rioting mob.

It was late at night when the rain from the dust of the asteroid explosion finally cleared up.

“Big brotherrrr…”

“Hm? What is it, Catherine?”

“I’ll be honest since it’s you, but my bikini’s knots have been a serious problem all day long. They’ve absorbed so much water I can’t get them undone…”

“Catherine, do you know what pi is used to mean in military slang? There are some problems that simply can’t be solved. If they can’t be untied, they can’t be untied. Go see Frolaytia or the old lady and they’ll cut the strings for you.”

“Big brotherrrrrr!! No, don’t abandon me…sob…”

“Stop that. Don’t cry, Catherine. Oh, honestly! Then head back to the barracks and grab a towel. Wrap it around your waist and I’ll use a scissors or a knife to cut the side strings!!”

“Really? Heh heh.”

“Wait. What happened to that tearful look from just ten seconds ago? And come to think of it, you could do this on your own if you borrowed a knife in the barracks. Right, Catherine?”

Quenser sighed, tested the motion of his shoulder now that the bullet had been removed, and called out to Heivia who was walking by.

“I heard Myonri’s going to be fine. Is that true?”

“Yeah. And speaking of which, you took a bullet too, didn’t you?” His awful friend sounded exasperated. “More importantly, the transport ship is going to arrive at the port soon. Looks like we can avoid having everyone starve for the time being. We might actually get something tastier than those soap-like rations we normally get.”

“So that’s why everyone’s been so excited…”

They were on the coast of Malta where Second Venice had come to resupply. Even inside the maintenance base, they could see the

transport ship's flashing signal light out on the dark sea.

"Once this is done, this whole mess will be over. I guess the next step is setting up curtain dividers in the shelters. If we don't separate out the male and female living spaces, the morals will collapse in no time. Then we'll have to deal with the kids, the elderly, the pregnant, and the injured. After giving everyone else such a warm welcome, we'll be the only ones left out, won't we? Don't tell me we won't get any of the fatty steaks."

Then a large shadow passed by.

"Is that the Information Alliance's Rush? I guess the Oh Ho Ho is on there."

"I wonder how she's doing. I doubt she likes protecting the transport ship in the Princess's place."

And as they discussed the situation, "it" happened.

A cruelly blinding light filled the dark sea.

In an instant, the large transport ship was blown away as easily as a sugar sculpture.

The two idiots' minds went blank.

They very nearly gave up trying to figure out what was happening before their eyes.

But that would not stop it from happening.

Yes.

"Wait, what just happened…?" Heivia forced the words out of his dry throat. "Did the damn Rush really just do that? Did she sink a peaceful ship full of humanitarian aid!?"

"Oh Ho Ho, are you serious…?"

They watched as the giant dark demon calmly crossed the deadly sea. No other Object in the area could move. No matter what ship or aircraft approached, that cutting-edge Second Generation could destroy them.

And the Legitimacy Kingdom had already released their own food supplies to the normal citizens on the assumption that they could

resupply.

They had no food.

If their supply line had truly been severed, Second Venice and Malta were entirely isolated in the middle of the sea.

The only ones that were safe would be the Information Alliance military who had yet to take any action. They had formed a fleet out at sea and there had been no word of them releasing their food supplies. If they were fully supplied, they could stay there for a month or two.

Was this to take back Second Venice now that the Baby Magnum was out of the picture?

Or did they have some other reason?

There was only one thing they could say.

“You’re willing to go that far, Oh Ho Ho? Do you intend to starve 130,000 unrelated civilians to rob us of our power!? Goddammit!!”

Part 12

“Oh ho ho.”

A voice spoke in the cockpit of the Information Alliance’s Second Generation Rush.

“Just pipe down and watch, you enemies of mankind.”

External Document – Complaint from the Sky Blue Company's HR Department

Mariydi! Everyone knows you’re the greatest earner in the Northern Restricted Zone for Sky Blue Inc.’s aerial division. Your name is always used as a positive factor during the shareholder meetings.

But please use up some of your paid leave. When someone works as hard as you, it increases the risk of people whispering that we exploit our employees. The external inspectors won't leave us alone about it, so can you please cooperate?

Oh, I know. What about Second Venice? The Mediterranean is perfect for the summer. While it does belong to the Information Alliance, they'll accept the wealthy from any world power as long as they bring their money with them. You're wealthy enough yourself, Mariydi. After all, the money you earn fighting wars nonstop is just piling up in your bank account. You need to spend some of that every so often. That's how capitalism works.

Look, here's a pamphlet. I've prepared your passport and plane ticket. You have a suite on the top floor of a five star hotel. Sounds nice, doesn't it? And if you back out, *you* have to pay the cancelation fee. You think that's a threat? Don't be silly. This is a company order. It's time to learn you need to obey those. Oh, stop that. This does not mean we're exploiting you.

Besides, it's not like this is on the other side of the world. It's only a few hours flight away from the Northern Restricted Zone you love down to the marrow of your bones. If anything happens, you can react in time, so don't worry. You're not some safe country newlywed wife who's worried about going on a trip after leaving her pet with a friend.

Good, that's what I wanted to hear. You can do this, right?

Aerial Division Captain Mariydi Whitewitch, I hereby order you to take a vacation at a world-class resort!!

…I can't believe I had to say that.

And at a wharf late at night, Mariydi focused on her earpiece while swapping out her rifle's magazine. She casually chatted over an unofficial line prepared for intelligence work.

"Hey! Oh, lord it's loud wherever you are. So how's your first vacation in a long, looooooong time, Mariydi? What is even going on? Are you watching a parade in front of your hotel?"

"Yes, I'm having the time of my life. …They really know what I like in a fireworks show."

Day 3

Part 1

“Soldiers! I know you must be tired, but this is an emergency.”

Frolaytia spoke from the dais at the front of the briefing room.

“The Information Alliance’s Second Generation Rush has set up a blockade. Now none of the transport ships with humanitarian aid from the Legitimacy Kingdom or anywhere else can reach us. This was just after the four world powers – including the Information Alliance – announced their intent to provide disaster relief. This violates international law. Their position should only grow worse, but that does not solve the more immediate problem. We must gather food as an emergency measure. Search through the half-destroyed Second Venice and check the warehouses, containers, supermarkets, convenience stores, shopping malls, bars, restaurants, and hotels. Go wherever you think you might find food and water and then retrieve it.”

“If the evacuated people learn about this, they’ll fight us for it. They’ll claim it belongs to them.”

Heivia sounded annoyed, but Frolaytia did not seem to mind.

“With the power out, the food in the city will spoil before long. The food would be too much for the citizens to eat before it rotted, but we can preserve it in our large cold rooms. Listen, this is not our food. Do not forget that we are merely storing it for redistribution. If you eat any while gathering it, that will be considered looting and you will be punished when discovered. Now get moving!”

Frolaytia clapped her hands twice to encourage them all.

None of them were particularly excited about this, but they had already released their own rations and their storerooms were empty. When they could not expect breakfast in the morning, they could not slack off, so they silently obeyed their orders.

With the Rush ruling over the surrounding sea, they could not use

transport helicopters. If it targeted them with anti-air lasers, they could not avoid them.

And unfortunately, their military vehicles could not drive through Second Venice thanks to the canals.

“We have to go on foot!? We’re just like some volunteers cleaning up litter!!”

“I think someone forgot what soldiers are for at some point.”

Heivia complained as they marched out into the late night ghost town now that the rain had stopped, but Quenser remained somewhat calm.

“I had kind of thought Oh Ho Ho was on our side. I mean, yeah, she’s an Information Alliance soldier and she’s the person piloting the Second Generation at the cornerstone of this war, so maybe I should have seen this as a possibility.”

Catherine was clinging to Quenser’s waist.

She had cut her bikini strings with the knife in the boy’s survival kit, so she had changed back into the blue special suit of a Pilot Elite. Catherine had done the work on her own inside a changing room, but Quenser’s small cooking knife now had the rare quality of being “the one used to cut a girl’s bikini strings”. The student himself was back in the sweaty military uniform that had been hanging up in his room.

Incidentally, Catherine’s special suit had some additional elements that resembled a thin-collared blouse, a ribbon tie, and a short pleated skirt. It made her look like a student. Lineage and honor were everything in the Legitimacy Kingdom, so they liked to reveal one’s status and occupation through their clothing. What school had she been in before that bastard Flide snatched her up?

“Are you shocked about the Information Alliance, big brother?”

“I’m not sure. Well, maybe I am.”

Second Venice had temporarily fallen under Legitimacy Kingdom control, but there were a lot of facilities and equipment they could not control without removing the locks placed on them by the Information Alliance. The broadcast towers were one example and they had been transmitting a swimsuit G-cup idol’s cheerful online

concert all day and all night long. It was being broadcast on all frequencies, so it amounted to jamming. Normal cellphones and smartphones without a military-grade control tower could not get word of the disaster out of Second Venice. And even if they did use some trick to punch through, it was obvious whose side the mass psychology would take when some random person's face appeared in place of the world-class idol's swimsuit.

There was a clear difference between those inside and outside the blockade.

Definite malice and hostility could be seen in the Oh Ho Ho's actions here.

"I thought we might run into her as an enemy, but it's true I never imagined it would happen like this."

"Let's stop talking about that Oh Ho Ho. If the Princess is listening in over the radio, this will only put her in a bad mood."

The Baby Magnum still could not take part in a high-speed battle after the hit from a piece of the asteroid. The Princess could do nothing about the Rush. Even so, she was still plenty powerful as a stationary gun platform. She might be able to support them now that the civilians had been fully evacuated from half-destroyed Second Venice.

"Will the Princess have a chance to help out here? Do you think the Information Alliance has troops hidden in the rubble city?"

"I stopped trying to make sense of this after a transport ship protected by international law was blown away before my eyes. Anything goes in this war. If we're attacked by little greys in backpacks instead of soldiers, I'm just going to roll with it."

As they spoke, a large supermarket in the south side came into view. It was dark inside since the power was out, the windows were broken, and the shelves had fallen over. When they shined their military flashlights inside, it looked like a strange cave.

"Heh heh heh. Now I've finished 'draw a portrait of a friend' and 'play basketball'. I've got a bunch of stamps now."

"Oh, you've passed your daily quota while I wasn't paying attention, Catherine. Did you make some friends at the base?"

“Look, big brother. The stamps cover more than half the card!”

“So you’re on the final stretch of the Civilian Acclimation Assistance System, hm? You’re real close to the safe country now.”

Catherine smiled like she was showing off a perfect score on a test.

Heivia peeked at the fresh foods section along the wall.

“The meat and vegetables look like a lost cause. I guess that’s just how it is in August.”

“We should be able to grab all the pre-packaged stuff and the cereal. And we should check the storeroom in the back.”

“Big brother, it’s nice and cool over here.”

There was still a chill in the meat processing room and storeroom in the back. No one had needed to open and close the thick insulated door, so it had kept the cold air in like a thermos. It had already been 48 hours since the asteroid exploded in midair, but time was still on their side.

“How are we supposed to carry all these cardboard boxes?”

“We’ll have to take a lesson from the ants.”

They stepped outside, pulled out a smoke bomb that let out colorful light and smoke, scraped the tip against the cap, and threw it out onto the end of the road. After contacting their fellow soldiers by radio, they noticed similar requests from the shopping malls and department stores in the area.

The Princess must have been monitoring them through a camera because she contacted them over the radio.

“You all seem to be having fun. It’s like a school camping trip.”

“I was always the type that hated volunteer work in the mountains so much I would vomit. So are you irritated that you’re stuck there? Try doing some stretches. But make sure to change into a white school swimsuit and give the stretches some real energy. Eh heh heh. That’ll bring some light to the world.”

“Quenser, could you not make me a part of your fantasies that make me want to vomit? Didn’t I tell you anything but a bikini isn’t even an option this year?”

Once they shared the location of the food, another unit could send someone to collect it, so Quenser's group moved on to another store.

Heivia let out a cheer on the way.

"Oh, hell yes! There's a soldier flying through the air using a water jet."

"Where did they drag that leisure product from? Are they entering a store through a skylight because the other entrances were crushed?"

"Huh? They have an engine on their back, but they still need that water hose dangling down into the ocean like a tail, right?" asked Catherine. "It's something like a vacuum cleaner, so I feel like it's still missing something if it's going to be a fashionable leisure item…"

Meanwhile, they ran into some other soldiers.

"Hey, aren't we supposed to be gathering food? What are you doing at a hardware store?"

"The place is full of weapons: crowbars, shovels, hammers, chainsaws…everything. A nail gun could be used as a projectile weapon. We still haven't set up any gun control, but I don't want to imagine what happens if they begin rioting and bring out things like this. We'll have to kill them."

The fact that their fear was not of being attacked by the rioters may have been a unique side of the military.

Quenser sighed.

"But we can't just destroy it all. With the blockade in place, we'll have to do any construction with whatever we can find. We still haven't built any real temporary residences."

"Yeah, neither option is great, so we'll have to retrieve them and store them at the maintenance base for now. See ya."

After leaving those soldiers, Heivia made an annoyed comment.

"Civilization keeps breaking down more and more."

"The Information Alliance might actually want that. If they do have soldiers hidden in the city, they might be working in secret to turn

the military and civilians against each other. I can see why Frolaytia wanted to retrieve the food right away."

"Hm?"

"What if the Information Alliance hid small glass shards on or in the food out here? The food we retrieved would kill the civilians. Then they would just have to shout complaints while pretending to be civilians themselves. They'd say the Legitimacy Kingdom sabotaged the limited food to reduce the number of mouths to feed. They'd say we were tricking everyone for some population control."

"Are you serious…?"

"Frolaytia told us not to swipe any of the food, remember? That may have been because she feared that possibility. She wants to retrieve it all and then do a thorough inspection because who knows what could happen."

Quenser's view had no actual evidence to back it up.

And misinformation had a way of spreading during disasters.

Which side was putting everyone in danger? The inability to answer that was what made a crumbling ghost town so frightening.

They went around to a few more stores and placed smoke bombs near the entrances, but after that, they were stuck helping carry it all back.

The rain had let up, so the midsummer sun beat down on Second Venice once dawn broke.

"Goddammit. It's already past six. With how diligently we're all working, I feel like something's bound to blow up soon."

"It's nice having a thousand people working together. We've finished carrying most of the food."

"But a lot of the food had gone bad already," said small Catherine as she strolled along beside them. "What a waste."

"I'll ask our busty commander if we can retrieve it later to make compost. We might be able to manage some fast-growing vegetables, like a resourceful office lady growing her own salad ingredients in her planter."

“And couldn’t we make batteries by sticking electrodes in the rotting oranges? Each one might not amount to much, but all of the fresh foods were wiped out. We could gather a whole bunch. Plus, the shelters will need power and I bet that would be more reliable than if one of them thinks he’s an amateur inventor and tries to build a generator.”

Naturally, they did not think they could grow enough to make up for the lost food, but it was better than nothing. Even if a bucket had a hole in the bottom, it could still hold a little water if it was tilted at an angle.

“Hmm. Wouldn’t that battery idea be pretty unsanitary? Would you be boxing up a bunch of rotten fruit and sticking it in the shelters? Wouldn’t that bring in a bunch of flies and roaches which would spread disease?”

“I guess it isn’t that simple.”

“If we need batteries, it would be safer to gather them from the motor boats floating upside down all around here. Their batteries have got to have at least some power left. And if we tear up a parasol just right, it can work as a propeller. Combine that with a bicycle light generator and we’ve got a wind power generator. I have no idea if that busty commander would give the go-ahead on any of that, though.”

At that point, Quenser felt a shiver down his spine.

(Wait… How long do I think we’ll be stuck here?)

A week? A month? ….Or a year?

They normally moved from battlefield to battlefield as a part of the Object’s mobile maintenance base, so they never stayed anywhere for long. But the Princess had been taken out and the Information Alliance’s Second Generation Rush was blockading the ocean. The usual rules no longer applied. He could not deny the possibility of being stuck here for an extended period of time.

And once they returned to the maintenance base, Frolaytia spoke to them.

“The MPs are measuring all of the food, but with this many people, it likely won’t last two weeks. Ten days if we’re lucky and seven if we assume there’s trouble and we lose some. And that includes the

rations we already released."

"…"

That provided a clear limit.

Before that caught up with them, they had to figure out what was going on in Second Venice, drive out the Rush, and remove the blockade. Otherwise, they would starve to death along with 130,000 civilians.

The delinquent noble grew pale.

"Wait, wait, wait! Isn't there anything we can do!? Can't they hold an international summit to gang up on the Information Alliance for breaking their treaties!?"

"This is the Information Alliance we're talking about. They're the world's best at weaseling out of things. I guarantee we'll starve before the ambassador their home country sends to the online summit has run out of excuses. But don't ask me whether it would be them speaking or just an AI negotiator stringing words together."

Quenser brought a hand to his forehead.

"Give us our orders. What do we need to do?"

"I wish you were always that eager, but to be honest, there isn't much we can do. And we might not even need to bring this to a direct conclusion ourselves."

The busty silver-haired commander winked.

"This isn't a desert on the moon. It's a Mediterranean resort. The Legitimacy Kingdom and Faith Organization home countries are right in front of us. The four world powers have already announced they intend to provide disaster relief. That means the Rush has made an enemy of the entire world with this blockade."

"You mean…?"

"Yes," said Frolaytia. "An Object will be here soon. One on our side."

Part 2

It was eight in the morning. The ocean glittered in the early morning sun as a Second Generation floated above it with an air cushion engine.

The Legitimacy Kingdom called it the Rush.

The Information Alliance's official name was the Gatling 033.

It was an amphibious model, but it was more suited for land battles. However, that did not matter here. That queen of the sea would use every attack method it had to exterminate any ship or aircraft that attempted to approach Second Venice.

(Honestly, even if it's borrowing Juliet's processing power, this fully virtual show just isn't very exciting. It lacks the edge only seen in the dances using my motion data.)

In her spare time, the Pilot Elite displayed a few small windows to check on the previous night's data for the online concert that had been running for several days. She was digitally reviewing the excitement over the high-speed connection as well as the combination of the song and dance.

(Oh, that's surprising. The private talk between songs has higher numbers than the intense dancing. Oh ho ho. I suppose cute and sexy are just two different things.)

She of course could predict what was coming.

The Gatling 033 was not fully controlled by the Pilot Elite. It was unique Object that was mostly left to a strategic AI named Juliet. By diverting those resources elsewhere, it could be used for some generic largescale simulations.

All that remained was to see who sent out an Object first and what Object it would be.

"Oh ho ho."

A thin mocking smile came to her lips.

"The Faith Organization? Yes, the Faith Organization! Since you've shown up now – oh ho ho – can I assume you have been tasked with opening the gate to hell?"

"What are you talking about? I am here for humanitarian purposes

and to drive you away so you cannot interfere with the safe travel of the transport ships. All four world powers have agreed to this. So prepare yourself, you bitch."

"Yes, yes. I'm sure that's the official reason." She did not seem at all bothered. "I do not know whether or not you are aware of Second Venice's 'true form'. Are you here to assist your superiors who informed you of everything, or are you just an ignorant pawn? … Either way, I cannot allow you to approach. Oh ho ho. At least make sure you give this everything you've got. A top idol is personally inviting you to dance after all!!"

Her enemy was an air cushion style of amphibious model. It had a standard and quite boring design: four rectangular floats arranged two-by-two to form a large panel. It had just the one main cannon: an old-style cannon on the right side that fired metal shells. There was also a large missile container on the left and various other cannons sticking out from its spherical main body like a sea urchin or chestnut burr.

To sum up, it was a First Generation.

The Information Alliance called it the Powder Cannon 011.

But things were different for the Legitimacy Kingdom. They had once referred to it as the Iron Lance, but they had begun to use a different name in recent years.

That name was the Old Fashion.

It was indeed old-fashioned, but it was undeniably an ace.

The Gatling 033 had the firepower of two rapid-fire beam Gatling cannons, so it boasted devastating strength on an ocean with no obstacles. Its rapid-fire attacks became a single long blade. Just by swinging that around 180 degrees, it could slice through most any Object. That was why she was stationed on the ocean even though that reduced her mobility somewhat. If she took out her enemy before they could do anything, she did not have to fear any damage.

But that assumption was overturned in a single shot.

Just as she began swinging her main cannon around to sweep the bluish-white light across the ocean, the Old Fashion fired a railgun secondary cannon.

Instead of at the Gatling 033 itself, it fired at the joint on the base of the Gatling-style main cannon just as it started to move.

“Wha-!?”

This was not a fatal blow.

But the impact still lifted up the Gatling 033’s main cannon. The line of fire shifted and the horizontal sweep passed fruitlessly above the Old Fashion.

Object battles were primarily fought by exchanging main cannon fire, yet this Object had suppressed a main cannon blast with one of its secondary cannons?

“You deflected it!?”

“Is that really so surprising? This is merely one of my tricks.”

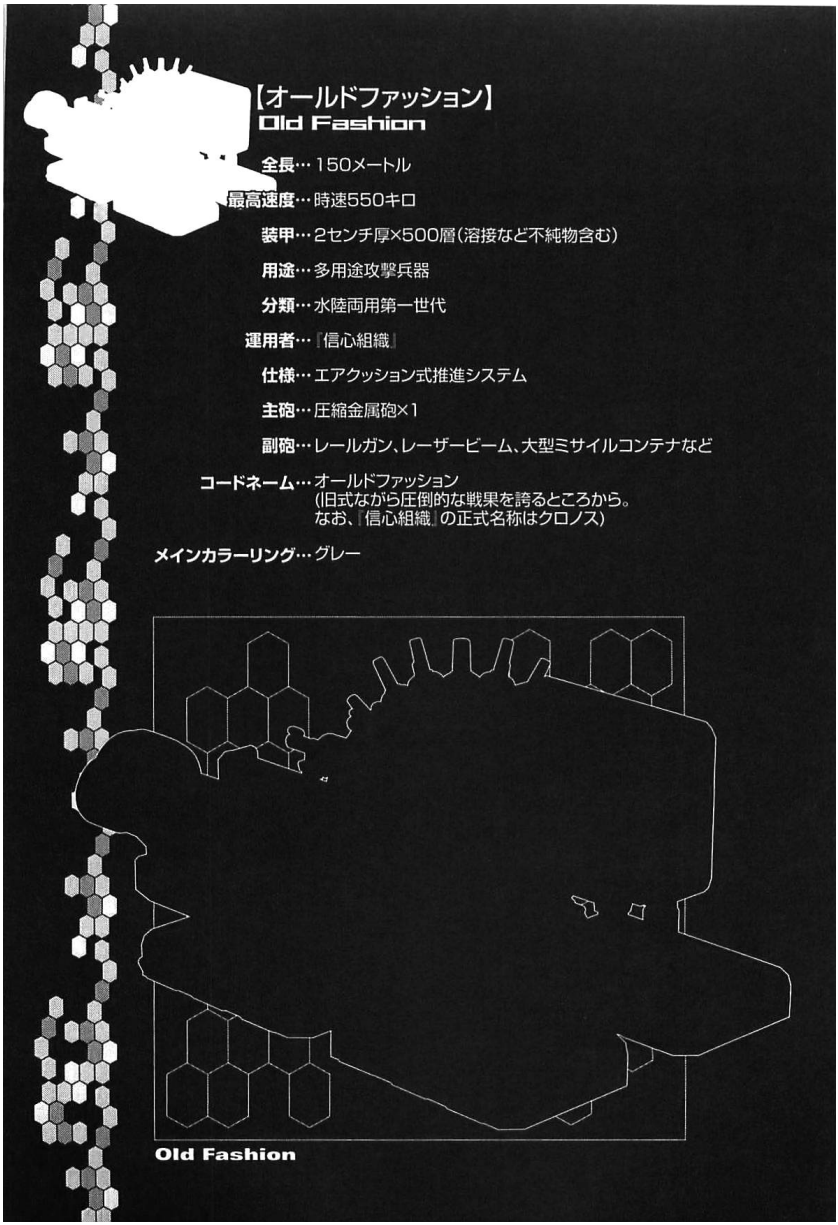
The Old Fashion put on a burst of speed to move fast and deep into the opening in the Gatling 033’s barrage. The Gatling 033 was meant for close or midrange battles, but she fell back because she did not like letting her opponent choose his distance. While keeping her distance, she made alternating sweeps of rapid-fire beam Gatling cannon blasts from the left and right.

But none of it hit.

Sometimes the Old Fashion would fire its main cannon into the ocean to create a wall of water in front of itself and sometimes it would use the floats beneath itself. Instead of a single float, it had four of them arranged two-by-two. Originally, that would have been so it could press one of them against the water or ground to make a rapid turn, but by intentionally submerging one of those floats and rapidly lifting it, it could launch up the nearby driftwood or flotsam like someone kicking up a soccer ball with the top of their foot.

Of course, the Gatling 033’s main cannon was not so weak that a wall of water or large junk could stop it, but it was enough to slightly divert it. The Old Fashion used that tiny margin of error to just barely evade what was supposed to be impossible to dodge.

Every one of those actions tore at her pride.



“You…!! But that’s a First Generation!!”

“Unfortunately, I have no intention of switching to a newer model. My lost friend designed this and I intend to take it with me to the grave. The only question is whether that will be today or in ten years’ time.”

That was another of the legends surrounding this Object.

Objects were a crystallized form of military technology, so the ones that absorbed the most advanced technology were the strongest. … But this old-fashioned pilot had singlehandedly overturned that theory. This veteran Elite had stubbornly rejected all orders to the contrary, continually refused any upgrades to a newer model, and ignored the modern trends and the military's desire for optimization. And it was all to keep a promise with a war buddy of his.

Yes.

He had the skill needed to drive an enemy world power to change their codename for him from Iron Lance to Old Fashion.

But what had the Faith Organization called it?

Cronus, the ruler who preceded Zeus.

The original reason for the name would have been different, but it was an ironically perfect name for the ace that continued to resist any advance in technology while slaying all the latest Objects.

"You need not try to entertain me, Information Alliance."

"Kh."

The owner of the ultimate piloting instincts bared his fangs against her.

"I will entertain myself with Cronus. It really doesn't matter who it is in front of me."

Part 3

The actual battle did not even last an hour.

Heivia pouted his lips as she stared at the flashing dots on the screen.

"Aww. The Old Fashion and Rush are moving away. Is that all you're gonna do!? Are you running away!?"

“The Old Fashion was probably only meant to fight a quick battle to gather information. It didn’t have to settle this in the first battle. After all, the Rush can’t send in another Object or Elite, so the Rush is the one that loses its advantage as time passes.”

As Quenser listened to that conversation between Heivia and Frolaytia, he narrowed his eyes in thought.

“Is the Old Fashion’s main cannon what I think it is?”

“Yes. It’s an old Object, so we have all the data on it. It fires metal shells, but it isn’t a railgun or a coilgun. It’s a compressed metal cannon. That sounds fancy, but it really only fires them with gunpowder the old-fashioned way. You saw the gigantic cross-shaped muzzle flash, right?”

“Gunpowder? How can that break through an Object’s nuke-resistant onion armor?”

“It uses special shells. The energy from the Object’s reactor is given to a press that applies extreme pressure to a large mass to sharpen it down to a pin-like point. The destructive power of two one-ton shells varies a lot depending on whether it’s as thick as a bowling ball or as narrow as a pin. Think of it like the difference between being stepped on by athletic shoes versus high heels. Some of the outdated tank guns would increase their destructive power by focusing the heavy shell’s kinetic energy on a dart-like pointed core, but you can think of this as an extreme mutation of that. And that allows it to pierce the armor that a nuke can’t get through.”

“Ugh,” groaned Heivia, but Quenser looked puzzled.

“But just like with diesel, wouldn’t forcibly compressing the shell create a ton of heat?”

“It’s just like the earth’s core. The melting point of steel is over 1500 degrees, but the core reaches 6000 degrees. The pressure from all directions is so great that the liquid can’t act like a liquid and then it’s bound by its solid state. And when a magnetic substance is exposed to high temperatures, it’s spin is disturbed, which can apparently cause irregular changes in its magnetic susceptibility and electrical resistance. The method was left behind by the flow of time. The shells’ paths were too unstable for railguns and coilguns, so the method tends to fall back on old-fashioned gunpowder. It might look strange now, but at the time, there was a lot of resistance to the switch from giant cannons full of gunpowder to

laser beams and railguns. It's all about who benefits."

Perhaps this Object was a freak specifically because it was old-fashioned. If just a little more time had passed, the firing method would have taken priority over the processing of the shell.

"That would explain why it has both a normal magazine and a drum magazine. One is for the explosive and the other is for the metal shells. I also don't see any cartridges being ejected, so maybe the powder is being wrapped up and held in place like a giant roll of old paper."

"It doesn't really matter as long as that antique from the pirate age can slap up the Rush for us."

"Also," cut in Frolaytia. "The Information Alliance has taken another action. Some soldiers hidden in Second Venice seem to have broken away from them. And they are showing no interest in surrendering to us. They are currently holding the observation deck of the Pillar of Truth, a giant broadcast tower on the east side."

"A broadcast tower?"

Quenser sounded skeptical and the busty silver-haired commander sighed.

"Assuming they aren't just seeing the sights, they might have wanted to hijack the airwaves and broadcast something to the world. Now, the tower itself seems to have had backup power to preserve the broadcast infrastructure in an emergency, but the crucial broadcast equipment was apparently remotely locked by the Information Alliance and they haven't sent out even a single 140 character comment. And that idol Elite's online concert is still playing on all frequencies. That swimsuit girl jamming is truly frightening. Anyway, the rogue Information Alliance troops haven't left the tower yet, so they're probably still fighting to unlock the equipment."

"So if we capture them…"

"We might be able to figure out what's going on, even if we can't get rid of the Rush. This group has broken free of the Rush to transmit something and the Rush is trying to stop them. It smells fishy to me."

With that settled, they had a mission.

But attacking a broadcast tower was different from attacking a normal building. It was going to be a real pain in the ass.

“The Pillar of Truth is 400 meters tall and the rogue Information Alliance soldiers are holed up on the observation deck at 300 meters. The elevators are of course stopped and they’ve completely cut away the emergency stairs. That means we’ve lost the normal methods of climbing to the top.”

“What are they planning to do? Hole up there until they starve?”

“The observation deck has a restaurant and a souvenir shop, so they’ll have plenty of food and water for the time being. I don’t know how they plan to escape, but towers like that tend to have maintenance gondolas like window washers use. If they need to, they might be able to descend with those.”

Of course, those would be stored up top, so Quenser and the other attackers could not use them.

Heivia rubbed his chin in thought.

“It would be easy enough to send out some snipers or an attack helicopter to fill the observation deck with holes, but then we might not be able to get our hands on whatever information these rogue soldiers have.”

“How are they equipped, Frolaytia?”

“As infantry, probably assault rifles and military handguns. Maybe grenades too.”

They could not get in from below.

Nor could they directly attack the observation deck to exterminate the enemy.

“Then what do we do? If we can’t attack from below, are we supposed to attack from above? But I doubt that pointy tower has a heliport.”

“Close but no cigar.”

Frolaytia responded to Heivia’s complaint with a serious nod.

The two idiots were confused, but then she said something even more inscrutable.

“We’ll be taking the average of those two by attacking from the middle.”

Part 4

The Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes entered the east side before the sun reached its peak.

Second Venice contained a spider web of canals, so they could not travel by truck. And taking a transport helicopter would be suicide thanks to the Information Alliance’s Rush’s anti-air lasers. The crucial waterways were filled with sunken rubble which could pierce the hull of a boat if one was not careful. But after spending so much time in the inconvenient city, even those potatoes could come up with an answer.

“We could have used a hovercraft this entire time?”

Quenser’s voice sounded muffled as he viewed the scenery flying by.

“Why didn’t we realize this sooner? What was the point of all that effort?”

“It can’t be helped, big brother. That effort is what brought us to where we are now.”

Short Catherine comforted him from the seat next to him.

The hovercraft used the power of air to float above the water’s surface, so it was incredibly effective. It was not entirely safe since they still had to avoid the pieces of metal sticking up from the water, but it reduced the amount of rubble and wreckage they had to avoid by more than 99%. They also came close to hitting their heads on the lower arched bridges, but it was still far better than gasping for breath as they traveled through the ruined city on foot.

But…

“Frolaytia,” asked Quenser.

“What is it?”

His reply came via radio.

The student looked down at his own body which was surrounded by something like a giant steel egg as he sat in the hovercraft.

“What is with this situation? Why is even Catherine wearing a powered suit?”

“First of all, Catherine Blueangel is a Pilot Elite, so she can pilot vehicles better than anyone. Second, her risk is the same on the front line or waiting back here. We don’t know how much of a backlash there will be among the evacuees, so she is safest inside a powered suit. Third, Myonri specialized at this sort of thing, but she was injured and has to sit this one out. I want to use every resource available. Fourth, until the officers in their safe countries rescind their orders, I cannot remove Catherine from her rehabilitation program. Fifth, I received a report on what happened in the container yard. And Quenser, you’re probably the only one that can control Catherine. How many points am I up to?”

“That’s enough, dammit.”

“Just enjoy this like it’s a date with your cute little sister. But don’t let her remove the powered suit unless it’s an emergency. Even if she says she’s thirsty, don’t just give her some drink you find. She has been isolated to a lab and has had little contact with germs, so her immune system is weaker than a normal person’s. Her risk of infection is fairly high, so keep her from consuming anything we didn’t supply for her.”

They were in Second Venice’s east side. It was filled with countless high-rise buildings with shattered windows, but a complex arrangement of steel beams formed a giant metal tower that rose twice as high toward heaven.

That was the Pillar of Truth.

The giant broadcast tower boasted a height of 400 meters.

“A cable broadcast would have been enough to cover an artificial island, but they must have wanted their shows to reach the living rooms of the enemy nations on the closest coast. That’s about what I would expect of the Information Alliance.”

“Yeah, they’re completely insane.”

“They probably think the same of us.”

The journey was so much different with a hovercraft. They arrived at the broadcast tower in no time at all.

Sporadic dry gunshots reached their ears from overhead.

“Ahh, ahh. What is this?” complained Heivia. “Those are our people collapsed on the ground, aren’t they?”

“Don’t just watch, Catherine.”

“Right. We need to drag the injured into a nearby building. Leave it to me!”

Quenser tried to sound cool, but he moved stiffly and awkwardly when he actually stood up in his powered suit. The different motors and actuators assisted his own movements, so there were no levers or pedals for the pilot to control. However, the apparent weight and the actual weight were entirely different and the center of gravity was very different from a human’s, so someone who had never used one before could trip over nothing. And if he did trip and fall into the water, he would not float back up.

Meanwhile, Catherine nimbly hopped out of the hovercraft and onto the walking path. She then ran through the rubble to make contact with the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers lying in pools of blood.

And then Quenser’s powered suit stopped moving.

“Oh, no… I think it’s malfunctioning!”

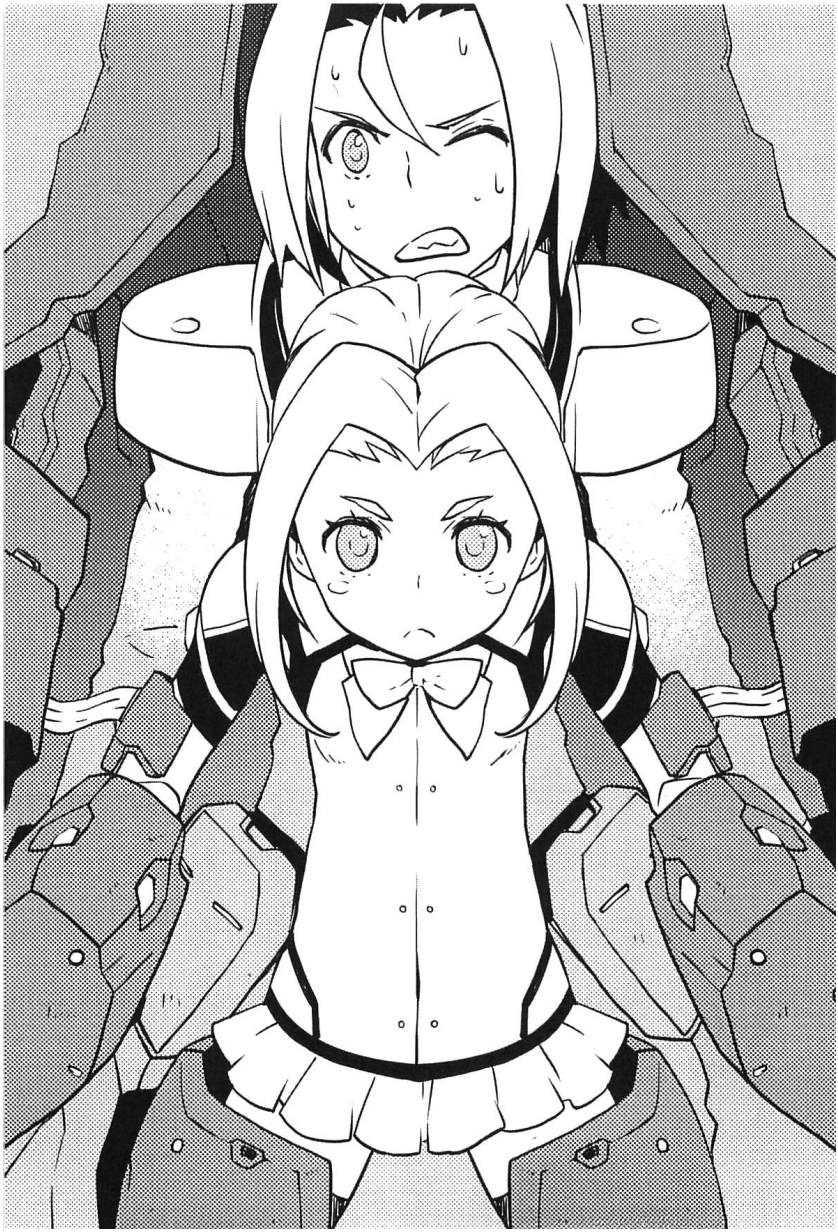
“Big brother, if it won’t move, then hurry up and get out!! You’re a sitting duck!!”

“In this downpour of bullets!? I’d rather not!!”

“What if they fire a rocket while you can’t move? Powered suits aren’t invincible!”

After she more or less threatened him, her pathetic big brother tearfully stripped off the thick armor. But more surprises awaited him. For some reason, Catherine had opened her powered suit’s hatch.

“What are you doing, Catherine! You’re on the front line!!”



“So hurry on in! An amateur like you will be turned into a sponge in less than a minute!!”

His balls shriveled up at that comment. Without thinking of the consequences, Quenser did as he was told and got inside Catherine’s powered suit with her. He was now holding the small girl from behind.

Yes, it was a lot like wearing a single mascot costume together.

“How should I put this…? What an amazingly girly aroma! And please, Catherine, stop fidgeting your butt.”

“We don’t have time for that. I’ll move, so you just relax, big brother.”

That began the world’s strangest form of teamwork.

They finally resumed their rescue work. Could they not move after being shot in the leg or were they being used as bait to draw other soldiers out from behind cover? Either way, they grabbed the male soldiers who had been left behind and brought them to a nearby bank.

They heard gunfire from above and something scraped across the powered suits, but it did little damage. They ignored it and ran.

“Sorry. We have a kit, so we can treat our own wounds. You need to prioritize the timetable.”

“What exactly happened?”

“The rogue Information Alliance soldiers are sporadically firing down from the observation deck. They’re using a shotgun. It’s probably a fully-auto model with a drum magazine.”

“A shotgun!? But there’s three hundred meters from the observation deck to the surface!”

“They aren’t actually aiming. Remember, they’re three hundred meters up. Dropping a pachinko ball, a screw, or a nail can be deadly at that height. They’re only vaguely aiming and then firing down a steel shower on full-auto. It’s like being hit by a spotlight.”

That sounded even more annoying than they had been expecting. It also somewhat conflicted with Frolaytia’s information. One of the powered suits had malfunctioned too, so nothing ever good came from a conversation with that busty commander. Idiot #1 swore in his heart that he would grope the hell out of those giant breasts later.

“Catherine.”

“Right.”

Quenser spoke to the blonde braid girl in front of him and the

powered suit resumed moving to match Catherine's movements. Shotgun blasts poured down from the observation deck, but they could ignore that.

Quenser sounded carefree as the gunfire hit them.

"This will get a lot worse if they pull out a grenade or grenade launcher. Even if they can't break through the armor, the impact will still mess us up like being stuffed in a metal drum and having a bat pounding on the outside. So let's get started already."

"You're the one taking the most time, big brother."

As they spoke inside it, the shared powered suit ran to the base of the broadcast tower.

"I thought it was just a bunch of steel beams, but there's a lot more to it, huh? There are maintenance stairways and catwalks…"

"But they've all been removed."

That was exactly right.

Normally, the narrow stairways and catwalks would have run along the outside of the steel beams, but there was no sign of that now. Up to about ten stories up, all of that had been cut away so it fell to the ground. There was no reaching the surviving portion without a firefighter's hook-and-ladder truck.

But that was not what Quenser and Catherine were after.

They were not going to grab onto the complex arrangement of steel beams and climb up.

They made their way to the main entrance. And instead of the industrial entrance for delivering supplies, they used the sightseeing entrance that led to the elevator and stairs up to the observation deck.

They stepped through the broken glass door.

There were plenty of LCD monitors above the ticket counter and they seemed to be playing footage from each of the stations, but they all had the same image now.

"This midsummer swimsuit concert is far from over! Oh ho ho. It is time for the next song. You recognize this intro, don't you? Now,

everyone, say the title on my cue. Three, two, one…"

Quenser sounded irritated as he watched it.

"They risked their lives to leave their unit, but they were drowned out by that jiggling G-cup bikini. I'd be desperate to accomplish something – anything – after that too."

"Big brother, you should probably look away from the bikini before saying something like that."

"There weren't any landmines rigged with wires, were there?"

"They probably had their hands full sealing off the route up and couldn't spare the time for that."

The elevator was of course not running. When they used the powered suit's leg strength to kick through the metal door, they found that even the emergency ladder had been cut away with a burner or something.

"We can't use the ladder or the stairs. The metal emergency stairs were all brought down with what looks like explosives."

"Then we can't let our guard down. That means they can blow up the powered suits."

On the inside and the outside, the way up had been cut away up to the tenth floor. And the bottom of that upper area would of course be guarded by enemy soldiers. If they tried to climb the wall or throw a rope up to climb, they would be exposed to the enemy's concentrated firepower while defenselessly climbing.

The stairs, ladders, and elevator were all out.

So were Quenser and the others going to give up and leave?

Of course not.

"Then let's go with the original plan. We need to support Heivia and the others from below, Catherine."

"Right. Let's cover the floor with pamphlets or whatever we can find and set some fires to smoke them out."

Part 5

They were on the roof of a bank near the Pillar of Truth, a giant broadcast tower and a landmark of the east side. Due to the limited land, the roof had been made into a nouveau riche villa and Heivia hid inside the manmade woods there.

“Oh, man. That student is as cruel as ever. The tower’s turned into smokestack full of black smoke.”

The enemy could keep people out by knocking out the elevator and stairs, but they could not do the same for rising smoke. And since they had cut off their own route too, they could not head down to put out the fire.

They could of course shut the fire doors to protect themselves for the time being, but that was not enough to relax. The intense flames could spread to the observation deck or the heat and fire could destroy the base of the tower and cause the entire thing to collapse. …Even if none of that actually happened, it was a success for Heivia and the others if the enemy was worried and panicked.

Heivia wore a mask connected to a small oxygen tank.

“Let’s get started while the skinny Information Alliance troops are focused down below. Myon-…”

Heivia caught himself and awkwardly clicked his tongue below the mask, so a large soldier spoke to him from nearby.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Marks, Evans, Conrad. Let’s charge in before they can recover from their panic. We’ll be defenseless while we make our tightrope walk, so we’ll all be wiped out if they can react rationally. So let’s get moving!!”

Heivia and the others rested something like a bazooka on their shoulders, aimed toward the neighboring tower, and pulled the trigger. The devices fired with what sounded like compressed gas rather than gunpowder. And instead of explosives, they fired a piece of metal with four sharp hooks jutting out in a cross shape. A long, thick wire was attached to the bottom.

After the hundred meter flight, the hooks powerfully connected the bank building roof to the steel beams of the tower.

“Agh, it didn’t work! My Elephant Shooter bounced off!!”

“Understood, Evans. You support us from this side with the heavy machinegun. …And you’re working with outdated information. These things had their name changed after a flood of complaints from conservation groups.”

They pulled out metal devices that looked like a bicycle’s T-shaped handlebars with handcuffs in the center and attached them to the taut wires.

As Heivia had said, they had no time.

While the Information Alliance was distracted by the smoke, his group grabbed the T-shaped handlebars and ran across the roof. After their starting run, they jumped onto the metal railing and leaped out into the air.

They were more than 200 meters above the ground.

Their flailing legs had nothing to rest on as the Legitimacy Kingdom potatoes coasted along the wires.

“Now this is dangerous!!”

“Looking at things from up here, I can really tell how badly this place was hit. Is this really a world-class resort island?”

Heivia and the others approached the “other side” as they listened to Conrad complain over the radio.

Instead of the steel beams of the tower itself, they were aiming for the narrow metal stairs and catwalks on the outside.

Once they arrived, the lovely sensation of support returned to their feet, but they did not have time to relax. The catwalks and stairs zigzagged up from there, but as Heivia grabbed the silencer-equipped carbine hanging from his shoulder, he saw something up above.

Some cables were carelessly winding along on the underside of the catwalk above them.

And something like clay was attached at even intervals.

“Goddammit…! Marks, Conrad!! Grab-…”

God did not give him enough time to tell them to grab onto something.

With a deafening explosion, the catwalks and stairs on the outside were purged and fell down all at once.

Part 6

When the entire tower shook, Quenser looked up as he and Catherine used their powered suit to deal with a burning metal drum.

“What? Did something happen?”

“Don’t move the powered suit on your own, big brother. It reacts to your motion too. We need to focus on fanning these flames.”

“You’ll get your ‘have a campfire’ stamp either way, right?”

“It’s ‘have a campfire with everyone’!!” said Catherine Blueangel as she carried the metal drum through the tower’s entrance and used a handmade tool like a giant fan.

But with an intense metallic sound of destruction, something heavy fell near the exit.

“Wah!!”

“Junk is falling down…”

But Quenser and Catherine had their own task and could not focus on that too much. They just figured something was going on up above.

If they left their post and the smoke thinned out, that would only cause Heivia’s group more trouble, so they focused on their job and sent plenty of smoke on up.

“There’s so much going on here,” commented Quenser.

“Yeah, all four world powers are here.”

It had all started with the rehabilitation program for Catherine Blueangel, the former Pilot Elite used as former Councilor Flide's pawn. They wanted to grant her wish of retiring, but since sending her to a safe country right away would be too dangerous, they were sending her to relatively safe and mild battlefields to gradually defang her. And the ideal candidates for that were Quenser and Heivia because they had met her when rescuing her.

The mission chosen for them was to protect Second Venice, a giant artificial island and world-class resort that had been temporarily taken from the Information Alliance. A satellite drop weapon from the Legitimacy Kingdom's past was going to fall on the island "by accident", so the Baby Magnum and the Rush had been tasked with shooting it down with their anti-air lasers.

It would have been a simple mission if the Appetizer Asteroid had not caused such a disaster.

"There was that old astronomer man, wasn't there?" said Catherine.

"Come to think of it, the asteroid was named after him and he was attacked by someone in the south side. Who were they?"

That had been a small incident and they had not had time to focus on it.

The asteroid itself had been destroyed in midair, but the shockwave and the pieces of the asteroid had crashed into Second Venice and caused severe damage.

"And then the Capitalist Corporations showed up," continued Quenser.

"They gave people copies of Legitimacy Kingdom launchers and had them shoot at us, right?"

"It looked like they came from a floating restaurant near a north side container yard and we went there to check it out, but we never figured out what exactly the Capitalist Corporations were after."

"They said something about Second Venice's system not being safe and destroying it being the only way to bring safety."

After that, a Legitimacy Kingdom transport ship had arrived.

"The ship full of food and water was blown away by the Rush. And

that means we're still short on food."

"But why did they do that? That's a surefire way of turning the world against you."

And an enemy for the Rush had indeed arrived from outside.

A Faith Organization Object had shown up.

It had been an outdated First Generation known as the Old Fashion. Its technology had been inferior, but the Pilot Elite's skill had put it on equal footing with the cutting-edge Rush. However, it had not tried to push things too far. After a short skirmish, it showed no sign of returning to defeat the Oh Ho Ho and open the way.

"The Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations, and the Faith Organization. All four world powers are indeed here."

"But it's obvious who our enemy is."

Yes. It was the Information Alliance.

They were the absolute worst. Why were they blockading Second Venice after the asteroid explosion had torn it apart? Why were they allowing all the civilians to starve?

To find out, they wanted information from the soldiers who had left the Information Alliance and holed up in the Pillar of Truth.

" 'Reminisce with someone.' Heh heh heh. Another stamp."

That summed up the environment Quenser and the others found themselves in.

Powered suit Catherine fanned the metal drum fire with her giant fan.

"But this has gotten really complicated, big brother."

"That's what we call real life."

Part 7

Meanwhile, Heivia threw himself from the metal catwalk's railing. He jumped inward rather than outward. He sought footing on the steel beams arranged like the ceiling of a gym.

But his comrades did not make it in time.

Conrad had not had time to let go of his T-shaped handlebars and he vanished from sight. The midair wire was meaningless if it was not taut. The soldier was still holding onto that entirely useless lifeline as he vanished into the east side cityscape that looked so tiny below them.

"Conrad!!"

"We don't have time for sentimentality, Heivia! Here they come! Get re-…gabh!?"

As Marks shouted over at Heivia, his mask grew red from the inside. Heivia heard the light gunshots of a handgun. His eyes widened at how close by they were. And they came from "outside", where the metal catwalks and stairs had just been purged.

He glanced over and saw the enemy.

It was a toy drone flying with four rotors. It had a camera lens on the bottom and a military handgun was attached with plastic tape. Finally, a thin shaft had been forcibly attached to pull the trigger.

This was likely what had noticed their approach and signaled for the detonation.

It was a very Information Alliance style of ambush.

"Dammit!!"

Heivia fired his silencer-equipped carbine again and again. He easily hit the thing, but unlike with a human target, he could not guess how many times he had to shoot it. He felt like he had wasted a lot of ammo, but he did manage to shoot down the attack drone.

While swapping out the carbine's magazine, he glanced over to his remaining comrades.

Marks was not moving.

He sat on one of the tower's steel beams and simply clung to it.

It was unlikely they could retrieve the body if Heivia left it there, but he could not just push it off either. Heivia settled on taking the dog tags and spare magazines. He dropped Marks's handgun and carbine down to destroy them (even though he had no idea whether or not the enemy soldiers would bother venturing down there).

Then he looked straight up.

He was the only one left, but he was not entirely isolated.

Being driven insane by silent isolation could wait until later.

He spoke over his radio.

"Evans, attach a camera and monitor to the heavy machinegun and watch me from that side. If you see any drones flying around the tower, shoot them all down. And make sure you don't hit me."

"You're going to continue!?"

"If I said I was too scared to keep going, do you really think someone would come collect me!? A helicopter can't get this close to the wall!! I have no choice, you idiot!!"

He was 200 meters from the ground and he had about 100 more meters before the observation deck. He could use the complex arrangement of steel beams for footing, but it was still like scaling a cliff.

"This just keeps getting more dangerous… Thank god I practiced my wall-climbing skills so I could peep on our busty commander in the bath."

This took both hands, so he could not hold his carbine properly. If another handgun-wielding drone showed up, he would have a million bullets up the ass before he could do anything. He had to rely on Evans for support.

It was a hellish climb.

The crosswind and gusts of wind were terrible. And the wind sometimes blew the black smokescreen toward him. The drones were occasionally shot down by Evans's heavy machinegun, but it was not perfect. He was sometimes spotted and a detonation was triggered directly above him, so pieces of the stairs and catwalks would fall like stones. He had to stop his climb and slip between the

steel beams to escape.

“That settles it!! If those Information Alliance bastards aren’t cute girls, I’m killing them on the spot! They’ll look like Swiss cheese when I’m done with them!!”

“Heivia, someone’s leaning out from the observation deck. An old man with a beard is aiming a fully-auto shotgun down your way!!”

“I wasn’t asking for spoilerrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrs!!”

Heivia tearfully ducked back from rapid-fire with a somewhat slower cycle than an assault rifle or submachinegun.

A courageous voice reached him over the radio.

“Should I take him out!?”

“Shut up! We don’t know how many are inside, so we lose our source of information if he’s alone! I’m almost to the observation deck, so spray some bullets around to keep him from moving but don’t hit him!!”

As requested, the heavy machinegun fired toward the observation deck. Each bullet was as large as from an anti-materiel rifle, so the fright of being anywhere near where they hit would take years off of someone’s life.

Some of the remaining reinforced glass must have shattered because clear shards rained down toward Heivia. He had to bite his lip because he could not get angry when he had been the one to request it.

Even so, he somehow managed to reach the observation deck at 300 meters.

He stepped inside through a broken window.

“Wait!”

There were only about three people there.

The only other thing to see was the cheerful idol showing off her swimsuit on the various monitors.

“Time for a topic drawn from a hat! The topic this time is…tah dah! O-oh? The moment when you see a member of the opposite sex and

your heart skips a beat? Oh ho ho. I seem to have drawn quite an exciting topic."

One of them aimed the fully-auto shotgun at him, so Heivia silenced him with a carbine shot between the eyes. Another one seemed bored and was toying with something like a game controller with a small monitor attached. He had a stiff smile on his face, but Heivia could not figure out what was so amusing, grabbed the guy by the collar, and threw him out the observation deck window.

"I cannot help but be charmed by a gentleman who runs full-sped toward his goal without worrying about appearances. Instead of trying to act cool, I like it when he is covered in sweat and mud while making a straight shot toward…kyah☆ I think I said too much. Oh ho ho."

The final soldier ducked down as an insane gap appeared between the worlds inside and outside the screens, so Heivia clapped his hands.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Now the number of corpses on both sides is even. As a super noble with a generous heart, I would love to strike a deal here, but what about you? If you're intent on continuing the fight, that heavy machinegun will be your one-way ticket to the afterlife. 12.7mm hurts like hell. Just a graze to the shoulder is enough to tear off an arm. It's like breaking open a tender lobster. So are you sure you want to fight?"

"The Legitimacy Kingdom…?" The soldier sounded bewildered. "Why are *you* here? Oh, oh! I get it. You're actually Information Alliance in disguise, aren't you? Nothing else makes any sense!!"

"Tell me everything you know, one at a time."

Heivia aimed his silencer-equipped carbine and that direct threat drove the Information Alliance soldier to silence. He glanced toward the fully-auto shotgun on the floor, but even if he could take out Heivia, he knew he could not prevent the heavy machinegun from getting back at him. He gave up on the idea and sighed.

The young soldier sat down, put his hands up, and spoke.

"I am Jax Spencer of the Information Alliance's Sd Independent Assault Logistical Support Unit. My rank is sergeant."

"What? Assault…logistical?"

“You can tell from our weapons that we’re not the intelligence team hidden in Second Venice, right? We were on standby so we could lend them some more firepower if they screwed up and had to make a run for it.”

In other words, they got to take every day off unless there was an emergency. And those emergencies would only occur once a year at best. They were a prime example of soldiers living off of people’s taxes. Heivia was jealous.

“That’s why it took us so long to figure out what they were doing. We thought this was a simple job like normal, but…dammit! I can’t believe they called Second Venice a world-class resort. If we’d known this was an infection base we would have refused the mission from the beginning!!”

“Wait, wait, wait. Let’s go over this in order. I just heard a really ominous term in there, didn’t I?”

“Listen, Second Venice is a world-class tourist spot. It officially belongs to the Information Alliance, but it’s actually full of wealthy residents of safe countries from all four world powers. …They gather here from all over the world and then return to every part of the world. You understand that much, right?”

“…”

“But Second Venice is an artificial island. It has a bunch of tropical-looking palm trees and such growing on it, but it’s really just barren land made from empty boxes of aluminum and reinforced stainless steel. That means the soil is fragile and almost entirely void of nutrients. To make up for that, they spread some kind of agar across the soil. It’s an Island Nation…what did they call it? Natto bacteria? Anyway, by covering the soil with that, it improves the water retention, replenishes the nutrients, and prevents the growth of mold. All of that is well and good, but there’s a problem. What do you think would happen if that harmless natto bacteria were replaced with some other kind of microbe?”

“Wait a second… Are you saying this is connected to the ‘infection base’ you mentioned earlier!?”

“The official name is Sprinkler 001. But at that point, it was still a beneficial project. More and more of our safe countries are plagued with resistant bacteria. The housewives with nothing better to do have been keeping everything so sparkling clean with anti-bacterial

sprays and wipes that everyone's losing their immunity and ability to recover. So when they get even slightly sick, they go to the hospital and take tons of antibiotics, which in turn increases the toxicity and resistance of the bacteria. The medical fees are no laughing matter. The VIPs needed to do something before the national treasuries were strained too far to continue waging war."

Jax smiled a little.

"It was a package of convenient and harmless bacteria. By setting them in the infection base of Second Venice and disseminating them, the infected carriers would spread them to the safe countries. The clean freak housewives would be letting the bacteria into their bodies without realizing it, but that would increase their immunity and reduce the frequency with which they visit the doctor. That would reduce the medical fees and allow the Information Alliance to focus on war. It wasn't a bad plan. At that point at least, it didn't harm anyone. …Yes, 'at that point'."

"There's more? Wait…you're kidding, right?"

"Something unexpected happened."

The Information Alliance soldier must have wanted to do anything but admit this out loud. His face was even more unpleasantly sweaty than when he had the gun aimed at him.

"They used a package that shouldn't have existed. So our Second Generation was used to quarantine the island. Of course it was. We don't know what Pathogen X is, but if it's brought back to the safe countries around the world, it's all over."

"Wait, are you saying something's happening to our bodies!? Are you saying we're filled with something people in strange protective suits would need to pack up in a plastic bag and keep in isolated storage!?"

"But this is a manmade disaster. We were never told the risks! We only learned about the infection base by desperately gathering information on the scene!! The Information Alliance needed to protect us. How could they let us rot with all the other corpses in this good-for-nothing graveyard!? We thought we could use the threat of transmitting this information to convince the main unit to come rescue us, but…but they…!!"

"Answer me, you piece of shit!!!!"

Heivia aimed his carbine at the soldier again, but Jax Spencer only gave him a thin smile.

"…It's too late."

His quiet voice sounded like someone remembering something on their deathbed.

Heivia felt a chill down his spine despite being the one aiming the gun.

"The grim reaper has already sown his seeds. Spend just thirty minutes in Second Venice and you're guaranteed to be infected. No one can escape this infection base. Yes, that's right. Yes, no one really understands. Not even I-…"

Part 8

Someone somewhere spoke.

"Do it."

"Oh, you've made up your minds? Oh ho ho. You top brass in the safe countries never do want to draw the short stick, so I thought you would keep stalling until we ran out of time. …There go my plans to analyze the swimsuit concert in my spare time."

"The situation this time leaves us with no other choice."

"Understood. I will cancel the work task and get back to my main job. I'm a little reluctant, but orders are orders."

"Will the distance be a problem?"

"Perhaps in a high-speed battle between Objects, but this is a stationary tower. Oh ho ho. I am just barely outside my ten kilometer range, but I should be able to manage.

"Then get to work."

"Yes, right away. As much as I hate doing this."

Part 9

Heivia received a transmission on his radio.

“Heivia, get down!”

“Princess?”

“I saw it on the radar. The Rush is aiming a cannon your way. Her target is probably the tower. Stay there and you’ll be silenced along with them. Hurry!!”

“…!!!???”

His throat immediately went dry.

But he could not imagine what exactly he was supposed to do.

A blinding light and intense blast shook the Pillar of Truth’s observation deck. Most of the windows had already been broken, but the little that remained shattered. Heivia could do nothing as his feet floated up from the floor before he was slammed against the inner wall a few meters ahead.

“Gaaa

short the swimsuit concert.

“Gh…kh… Jax! Jax Spencer!? Where are you, dammit!? If you can come here, then get over here!!”

Heivia had been blinded by the light and he choked as he yelled.

He received no response.

But he doubted the other soldier had escaped.

His eyes finally adjusted after a few dozen seconds and he found a giant mess where the observation deck’s interior had been.

And he saw the remains of the windows on the opposite end.

A single foot in a boot had been torn off at the ankle and was caught on the twisted window frame.

“This is Heivia.” Heivia groaned and reached for his radio while lying on the floor. “I acquired some information at the observation deck. Second Venice itself is a global infection base created by the Information Alliance and some kind of unexpected situation has apparently led to it disseminating an extremely dangerous Pathogen X. Yeah, and there’s a chance we were infected too! I repeat!! We all might have been infected and that makes the Rush the righteous guardian of mankind for setting up that blockade! Goddammit!!”

External Document – Journal Saved to a Hair Accessory's Micro Memory

My big brother is an amazing person.

I mean, he saved me from war. He destroyed the cutting-edge Second Generation Exact Javelin, defeated Councilor Flide, and rescued me from that lab full of pain and suffering.

It sounds like something from a movie.

But there was one thing different from any action movie.

My big brother never touched a gun.

I think that's amazing. It's way, way more praiseworthy than everyone thinks.

Anything goes in war. People say it's protected by international rules and the concept of clean wars, but that's all a lie. That should be obvious from the moment a flesh-and-blood soldier is forced to take on an Object.

But even so, my big brother never relies on a gun.

I know how reassuring a single bullet can be. I know that really, really well. To an embarrassing extent. But my big brother sets aside the reassuring weight of a gun like it's normal.

Things like an age of peace or mutual trust don't really mean much to me.

Even in a safe country, I don't think I could walk around without a gun at my hip.

But my big brother showed me it can be done.

He showed me a gun isn't necessary. He made it through the worst possible battlefield without a gun, so a safe country should be a piece of cake.

He's a role model. He's someone whose example I should follow.

Or to put it another way, he's my big brother.

Maybe I can get past needing a gun too.

My big brother is everything I aspire to be.

Day 4

Part 1

A gag order was quickly placed on the information.

For that reason, the only people aware of the term “infection base” were the top level members of the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion and the soldiers directly involved in the attack on the Pillar of Truth. If that dangerous information had reached the entire battalion or even spread to the makeshift housing outside the maintenance base zone, there would have been no stopping it.

That said, Quenser and Heivia had only obtained the phrase “infection base”. They did not know where it was controlled or what deadly package had been set up in place of the natto bacteria for soil improvement or the harmless bacteria meant to increase people’s immunities.

Time passed meaninglessly and the date changed.

Frolaytia had apparently been investigating the matter somewhere and she now called a limited group into the briefing room. It was of course only those who knew about the infection base after taking part in the broadcast tower mission.

“I’ve finally found a way we can take action.” Frolaytia looked exhausted as she began. “We found a few possessions among the mangled bodies of the Information Alliance soldiers thrown to the ground from the observation deck. The electronic simulation division and the intelligence division investigated the manufacturer and production number of the key we found. Performing a cyber-attack on the Information Alliance is something I would much rather *not* do, but we found a few interesting tidbits of information. Well, even if it was used to store military equipment, the manufacturer itself was a civilian workshop. Old-fashioned craftsmen are great at work that can’t be emulated by machines, but they’re weak on the data management front.”

The busty silver-haired commander turned on the projector to display a map of Second Venice on the wall.

“The lock maker made an installation here in the underground block of the west side. That is likely the entrance to the infection base in question. I want you to investigate it.”

“Um, isn’t the deadly package disseminated through the agar mixed in with the soil? Have you found anything in any soil samples?”

“We have found nothing at all.”

Frolaytia answered Quenser’s question while placing a hand on her forehead.

“I had our doctors and medics look into it, but for the time being, there is nothing of note they can see under the microscope. Of course, that doesn’t mean there aren’t any germs, but it’s only what you would expect to find in the soil. They have no idea what this deadly Pathogen X could be.”

“Then…”

“While treating Myonri, we checked her blood and found nothing out of the ordinary. Quenser, you also had a bullet extracted and your blood test also came back clean. There wasn’t a problem.”

“Th-then what is this? Did that Jax guy just jump the gun?”

Heivia asked his question with a thin smile carrying some wishful thinking.

But his busty silver-haired commander did not confirm or deny the possibility.

“It’s hard to say. But the Rush’s actions are certainly worrying. I can’t imagine she would do anything so suicidal unless she had a reason like this.”

And based on a report from the Princess, there was suspicion that the Rush had jammed the Baby Magnum when they were intercepting the Supernovas and the asteroid.

Had it begun all the way back then?

If they wanted to blow away Second Venice and its possible largescale infection, an attack from satellite orbit may have seemed like an effective means of “sterilization”.

“So should we at least assume the talk of an infection base is true?”

“That would be better, but I wouldn’t call it best.” Frolaytia sighed. “Did the virus fail to spread because it could not travel through the soil properly, or is the deadly package still in place and just hasn’t been activated yet? Either way, I want data on this infection base. If we’re going to prove we haven’t been infected, I want data on this Pathogen X… And if in the worst case the device simply hasn’t activated ‘yet’ and starts disseminating it through the soil, I want to remove the deadly package from the device before that can happen. Whatever the case, we have no time. Even without the virus, don’t forget that we have limited food and water.”

However, Quenser and the others did not know what was inside the deadly package or who had set it up. Even if the infection base itself belonged to the Information Alliance, it may have been someone else who swapped out what was to be disseminated.

Who had attacked the astronomer who had predicted the impact from the Appetizer Asteroid?

How much had the Capitalist Corporations in the container yard known and what were they trying to gain by stirring things up with the copied grenade launcher?

The mysteries never seemed to end.

They had far more questions than answers.

Quenser placed a hand on his bangs and muttered a fundamental fact.

“We’ll just have to investigate them one at a time.”

Part 2

With that, they had to set out for the underground entrance thought to lead to the infection base based on the production number of the key held by a corpse.

“Hm, hm, hm, hmmm.”

“You’re in a good mood, Catherine. What is it?”

“I’ve almost got all my stamps. I’m one away from the full set!! I’m almost too good at this. Heh heh heh.”

They took a hovercraft along the canals to the west side, but they could not bring it the entire way.

“Looks like this is as far as it can go,” said Evans in a short and squat powered suit. “Even if the hovercraft gets us up a little higher, we can’t go any further.”

Quenser did not try to argue. The scene before their eyes said it all.

“This is awful…” said the student as he viewed the city of rubble in front of them.

The canal should have been quite deep, but something like black stone jutted sharply up from the surface. And it was not just the canal. Stones larger than refrigerators had stabbed into the sides of high-rise buildings and gotten stuck. More than that, several buildings had entirely collapsed, creating something like runways.

Heivia stepped out from the stopped hovercraft and voiced his annoyance.

“You’re kidding, right? And this is *after* the Princess broke it apart in midair? How huge was that nuisance of an asteroid to begin with?”

“The vector was also broken up when it burst in midair, so this was much less devastating than it might have been,” said Catherine.

However, Quenser could not imagine something being much more devastating than this.

When that gang of powered suits looked into the distance, they could see a new landmark in the city of rubble. If they had not known better, they might have thought it was the silhouette of a domed stadium.

It was a piece of the Appetizer Asteroid.

It was dozens if not more than one hundred meters tall. If the asteroid had fallen straight down without breaking up, it could have invited in a new ice age.

Quenser and the others used the power of their powered suits’ legs

to march across the float as it creaked disconcertingly.

“I have no idea which road is which.”

“More importantly, what is this noise? Please tell me the entire float isn’t bending under the asteroid’s weight.”

The seawater occasionally welled up from below. It seemed to be spraying from large holes much like the narrow crevices on a snowy mountain, but that was inaccurate.

Evans stopped in front of one crack and made an unnaturally awkward movement of his powered suit’s arm. He may have been trying to wipe the sweat from his brow before realizing he could not.

“Hey, there’s nothing but the ocean below here, right?”

“The bottom is uneven. When they developed the underground, they built it up like an upside-down pyramid, but when they didn’t, there’s only a thin layer between the surface and the ocean. So don’t fall. I don’t know how deep the ocean is here, but you’ll end up on the bottom if you’re wearing your powered suit.”

The buildings had crumbled and filled the pathways like there had been a landslide. In fact, the supposedly flat ground was slanted in some places.

“That isn’t going to break right off at some point, is it?”

“Big brother, wouldn’t it be faster to follow the ‘path’ cleared by the asteroid instead of following the roads?”

The four of them walked in silence for a while.

Quenser asked a question on the way.

“Is the ocean nearby?”

“Why do you ask that, Quenser?”

“Well, I can see a huge silhouette out at sea. The Rush is slowly patrolling the area.”

That was the greatest threat at the moment, but there was nothing they could do about it.

They continued marching through the rubble-filled city with their powered suits.

“By the way, Catherine, what do you want to do after getting into a safe country?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you want to go to school or play at a park or something?”

“Where did you live, big brother?”

“Paris. The Legitimacy Kingdom home country. Well, I was actually born way out in the countryside, but that’s what feels like home now. My childhood friend named Monica could be dangerous. I’d finally managed to move thanks to my dad changing jobs, but then I ran into her at school! I shouldn’t have chosen the best science institute in the country!!”

“Hmm…”

He could not see her expression through the powered suit, but he had a feeling Catherine’s shoulders had relaxed.

“Paris, hm? That sounds like fun.”

Meanwhile, they somehow managed to arrive at their destination.

They found a stairway leading down. Originally, it had likely been disguised as some kind of building, but after all the boulders raining down, the boxy building had entirely vanished and only the stairs remained.

“Wow, there really is a secret underground facility here. And this is supposed to be a classy resort for the rich.”

“But this place is all a giant manmade megafloat, so it would have been way easier than if they had to dig out the place with a pickaxe. They may have just rearranged the aluminum and reinforced stainless steel blocks back at the planning stage.”

It looked a lot like the entrance to a subway station.

“I’m guessing it’ll be pretty beaten up down there. Let’s just pray the door hasn’t bent so badly we can’t get it open.”

“We’re in powered suits, so can’t we just break it down?”

“This is an infection base we’re talking about, remember? It wouldn’t surprise me if they used a giant sealed door of thick duralumin. Y’know, like something used for a bank vault.”

They adjusted their grips on their weapons and descended the stairs one at a time.

The solid space of concrete and tiles did indeed feel a lot like a subway station. But large cracks ran through the walls, entire ceiling panels had fallen down, and the wiring within hung down like noodles in a Chinese restaurant.

Quenser noticed something and came to a stop.

“Frolaytia? Can you hear me? …Damn, is it because we’re underground? The signal’s dead.”

“Or maybe they shielded the infection base.”

But something else was more worrying.

“What?” said Evans as he looked around. “This area’s power is still running?”

The fluorescent lights that had not broken were lit. They were blinking in and out and most of them were out more than they were in, but it was still surprising for the west side to have some hint of civilization remaining since it had received the most damage.

Quenser groaned.

“Maybe wind power or solar power? No. If it was on the surface, it would’ve been taken out by the asteroid strike’s shockwave. Maybe they have a backup power source on the bottom…like ocean current power.”

“That’s not a good thing. These wires are torn to shreds. If there’s a short somewhere, who knows how far the fire would spread.”

Either way, they could not rely on the fluorescent lights that could go out at any time. They messed with their powered suits’ cameras to enhance the lighting and then continued on.

Further in, they found a large and imposing door, just like Heivia had feared.

However…

“Hey, look. It’s been cut through.”

“Did the Information Alliance cut their way out after being trapped inside?”

“It was cut from the outside, so I doubt it,” pointed out Catherine.

They exchanged a look with their powered suit lenses.

“Then did someone force their way in?” asked Evans.

None of them had an answer.

Still confused, they stepped through the large door someone had cut through.

And as soon as they did, they were struck by the sound of a weapon firing. It was loud enough to feel like a shockwave.

Being in an enclosed cave-like facility likely helped, but it may have harmed their eardrums had they not been protected.

But they were currently wearing powered suits.

Quenser only saw orange sparks scattering from his chest.

“You son of a bitch!”

“Stop, Heivia! Don’t kill him!!”

Quenser’s words fell on deaf ears.

Heivia was carrying a weapon that looked like a two meter version of the *jitte* seen in Island Nation period dramas. Attached to both of the branching ends was a “plate” much like the parabolic antenna for a satellite broadcast. The short end had a concave one and the long end had a convex one.

The convex one exploded.

The plastic explosive attached evenly to the surface and the 800 small metal balls meant to further increase the explosive power filled everything in the 120 degrees in front of Heivia.

It sounded like raindrops striking a thin metal roof during a squall, sparks flew from the walls, floor, and ceiling, and every surface appeared to glow orange.

“Hell yeah!! That’s what I wanted from a fancy powered suit. Holding a directional landmine in your hand is completely insane! …Anyway, Quenser, what were you saying?”

“Never mind, you moron! I thought that guy might know what was going on, but you had to blow him to bits with the Halberd!!”

Quenser shouted at Heivia who casually swapped out the “plate” on the end. All that remained was a dark red jelly that would teach them very little. It did not even look like a solid object anymore.

And Catherine did not seem to mind at all.

“But big brother, we were only issued the Halberd, so there’s nothing else we could have done. Well, I suppose we could have punched him with our giant fists.”

“He’d be torn to pieces either way,” said Heivia.

“The convex one is for broad-range anti-personnel attacks and the concave one is for single-point anti-tank attacks, right? Why would Frolaytia only give us such a tricky suppression weapon!? She isn’t writing up reports on experimental weapons to make some money on the side, is she!?”

“The powered suits have big fingers, so they can only use firearms specifically designed for them. The fingers also aren’t suited for taking apart and maintaining a weapon, so it’s best to use a simple but powerful weapon.”

They walked further in while listening to the obedient girl’s explanation.

They occasionally ran into a soldier of unknown affiliation, but they never received much information. After all, their only options involved blasting them to pieces in a single blow. These were soldiers instead of criminals, so they were not going to stop just because they were told to. And the Halberd scattered metal balls in a fan shape, so there was no such thing as a warning shot. It was hard to not hit someone directly and the 800 metal balls would still ricochet off the walls, pillars, and powered suits, so they would blow away the enemy soldiers regardless.

“They really need to ban this thing with a war treaty,” grumbled Quenser.

“I know you don’t exactly like being soaked in people’s dark red remains, but you should be thankful these things are letting us win and survive. It’s working amazingly well for something our busty commander issued us. Maybe she’s finally done pretending she hasn’t fallen for my dashing good looks.”

Meanwhile, they had no results to speak of.

But when they descended some stairs, they found something different.

“Someone’s collapsed over there.”

“Wait, Quenser. Don’t just walk over like an idiot. What if they’re lying on top of an anti-tank mine?”

Idiot #1 ignored Heivia’s warning and recklessly walked down the straight corridor to check on the corpse lying face down. He crouched down and brought his face in close even though he could zoom in with the powered suit’s lenses.

“Odd…”

“What is? If his map case or rations are connected to a thin wire to pull the pin from a landmine, I don’t want any part of this. Powered suits aren’t invincible.”

“It’s nothing like that. Look at this, Heivia. Oh, and stand back a little, Catherine.”

“Why should I hold back after all the gore I already saw, big brother?”

Catherine walked right on out. It was somewhat unfortunate when she was supposed to be learning how to function in normal society.

“He doesn’t have any visible injuries. He wasn’t shot.”

“And what’s this? He’s soaking wet.”

Heivia and Evans also nervously approached. A powered suit could deflect an assault rifle, but anything more than that would be dangerous. Their general position was obvious enough from the fact that they had been unable to replace tanks and armored trucks. Simply put, no one believed they were perfectly safe.

Evans seemed to be the biggest chicken because he viewed the

corpse while a little further out from the rest.

“W-was he tortured like that?”

“No, Evans, it wasn’t that. He has no marks on his wrists. If he had been bound with rope or kept in handcuffs, he would have scrapes from when he struggled.”

“And look…”

Because Quenser had mentioned the wrists, Heivia looked at the corpse’s arm and groaned.

From the wrist to elbow was a tattoo of two snakes coiled around a single staff.

“I was wondering who these idiots were, but they’re Kerukeion. I don’t even want to touch this.”

“Who are they?”

“A Faith Organization group in charge of bioethics. They belong to the Greek Mythology faction and they’re as insane as you might expect. Well, that last part probably describes just about anyone in the Faith Organization that’s holding a gun.”

“What exactly do they do? Are they ‘anti-sperm bank’ robots, ‘radiation therapy is the work of the devil’ rangers, or something like that?”

“They’re ‘we can use it but no one else can’ warriors.”

“Hmm. That’s just the worst.”

But a bioethics group that would know a lot about medicine and biotechnology sounded quite ominous at the moment. This was an infection base secretly built by the Information Alliance to take advantage of the global tourist location and Quenser’s group was here because some third party had apparently used that to create an incredibly dangerous situation. None of it sounded hopeful.

“I wish we’d done a proper investigation of the group that had captured that old astronomer. They might have used some thick foundation to hide their tattoos.”

“But if the Faith Organization is behind this, isn’t it weird for one of them to be dead here?” pointed out Catherine.

“I don’t see any Information Alliance soldiers, so did they run away? Or were they already killed?” asked Evans from a short distance away. “Either way, we should assume those Kerukeion people have taken over.”

Heivia tried to scratch his head through the thick armor of the powered suit.

“I don’t like the sound of this. We aren’t going to find out they were the first ones wiped out by their own mysterious virus, are we!? This isn’t a zombie movie, so I’m not sticking around for that!!”

“No, wait. This is water and not sweat, right? He only drowned. I don’t think he was killed by a virus or whatever.”

“Then did someone throw the Faith Organization soldiers into some water to kill them? Did the Information Alliance survive, take back their facility, and torture the Faith Organization? Are we not seeing any Information Alliance soldiers because they’ve moved to some kind of shelter somewhere?”

“Wait, Evans. We’ve already gone over this. There are no marks on his wrists, so he probably wasn’t tor-…”

Quenser trailed off.

Heivia’s powered suit swayed to the side, so he may have tilted his head inside.

“What is it? What annoying thing did you notice now?”

Quenser did not respond.

It may have been because he was an amateur student that he noticed it first. He had lowered his eye level when he unnecessarily crouched down to inspect the corpse, so when he looked toward Evans, he naturally ended up looking up.

And then he saw it.

A line ran along the wall near the ceiling which was tall enough that they were not about to hit their heads even in the powered suits.

“What? The color of the wall…changes?”

“?”

“No, that isn’t it. It’s water. That’s how high the seawater flooded this room!! It’s taller than the powered suits… I don’t know how it happened, but I think this guy drowned when the corridor was flooded without warning!”

That was when an ominous creaking sound surrounded them and weighed on his stomach.

Heivia looked around.

“Hey, what is that?”

“Oh, no. Just run! We won’t float back up if we’re submerged in these thick powered suits!!”

They were unsure whether they should return the way they had come or continue on, but the sound seemed to be coming from the way they had come. They naturally chose to move away from the oddity, so they ran further in.

Was the entire float creaking as a “wound” in the ground grew wider?

Geysers of seawater burst up from all around.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit!!”

“Big brother, there’s a waterproof door in our way!!”

“We have a Halberd that can break through a tank’s armor, so we just have to blow through that metal door!!”

Heivia shouted from the lead and held out his weapon. Instead of using the convex end that sent the blast over a wide area and scattered metal balls, he used the concave end that focused the blast on a single point to pierce even a powered suit. To avoid being hit by accident, Quenser and the others slowed down to ensure they did not pass Heivia. But…

“No, wait…”

“What is it, big brother?”

“Stop, Heivia!! The door’s seal is damaged and water is leaking from below! The other side must already be-…!!”

It was too late to stop.

An explosive roar filled the sealed space and a thin spear-like blast tore through the steel door like a flimsy empty can.

Immediately, the fearsome explosion was answered by something other than flames. It was a water gun like water shooting from a dam. With the equilibrium broken, the hinges burst off and the remains of the thick steel door were torn from the wall. It left incredible scratches on the concrete wall, but they did not have time to watch.

They were knocked from their feet even in the powered suits.

In just a few seconds, the corridor was inundated with dirty seawater at waist height. The bloated corpse was swept away and the water was clearly going to reach the ceiling before long. No matter how strong they were, the powered suits would become humanoid coffins if they were submerged.

Catherine was the youngest and the first to make up her mind.

With the sound of compressed air being released, the armor opened. The girl with a blonde braid left the back of the powered suit.

“Catherine!”

“Big brother, you and everyone else need to take yours off too!! Once you’re submerged, the water pressure will keep you from opening the hatch!!”

“Dammit, we have to swim through a pool filled with corpses? What the hell!?”

Heivia cursed but removed the powered suit as he was told. Quenser took too long, so Catherine and Heivia worked together to activate the external emergency release. The student was dragged out into the dirty seawater, swallowed a mouthful, and got his head above the water as it burned his throat.

“Evans!!”

“No…”

“You’re a soldier, aren’t you!? It’s a little late to say you have a phobia of corpses!!”

“This is a mysterious infection base, isn’t it!? We don’t know how

far it's spread throughout Second Venice, but a half-destroyed lab has got to be the worst place to be!! I'm not taking this off!! I refuse to die here!!"

Catherine and Heivia clicked their tongues and reached for the external emergency release like they had with Quenser, but Evans was so panicked he swung the powered suit's arms around to keep them away.

Meanwhile, the situation reached the point of no return.

The entire float tilted.

However, it was hard to tell for Quenser and the others who were floating in the water. No matter how much one tilted a cup of water, the surface of the water would always remain level.

The truth of the matter was only apparent to Evans whose powered suit was standing on the ground. He seemed to trip over nothing and vanished into the filthy water.

"Evans! Where are you!?"

"It's no use, big brother! The water is flowing weirdly. It's probably all pouring into a big crack in the floor!!"

Evans never returned to the surface.

He had likely fallen. Still in his humanoid coffin, he had fallen through the "bottom" of Second Venice where he would simply sink deeper and deeper.

"How long…will his oxygen last?"

"His mind will probably break first while trapped in there and unable to move! We need to report this to our busty commander and have her send out a deep sea probe for him!!"

Quenser and the others did not have time to worry about Evans. A crack ran through the bottom of the float and the "wound" widened as the entire float groaned under the asteroid's weight, so the amount of water was increasing endlessly. If the water reached the ceiling, only death awaited them.

Catherine grabbed at a handhold on the wall and looked behind her.

She looked to the staircase leading up at the end of the long corridor.

“Let’s keep going.”

“Why!? What do we do about Evans!?”

“We can’t reach the stairs in time even if we let the current carry us! I don’t know what we’ll find further in, but we have to gamble on that!! Our radios can’t reach anyone outside, so if we die, they’ll never know that Evans fell!!”

“Goddammit!!”

They were fighting the current and it was too powerful to make any ground while swimming. They had to grab at the handholds on the wall and pipes on the ceiling to slowly drag themselves in through the broken waterproof door.

Everything about the situation was terrible.

But fortunately, the next room had a higher ceiling and the water level stopped after the waterproof door had been entirely submerged. Only the unnerving creaking continued.

Was it due to the waves, the asteroid’s weight, or the west side float slanting with the buildings collapsed on top? Whatever the case, the “wound” seemed to widen from time to time.

“This can’t keep happening forever… The water is only rising or stopping. Since it can’t drain, we’ll be stuck eventually.”

“We can only pray there’s another way out. We can’t turn back now since that long corridor is filled to the ceiling with water. We wouldn’t be able to breathe without oxygen tanks.”

The scariest part was how their survival hinged on some unknown factors. Even now, seawater was trickling in from various points on the walls. The wall could burst and fill the room with water at any time, so their safety could vanish in the blink of an eye.

Plus…

“We were relying on the powered suits before, but now we’ve only got handguns. If we run into a group of the Faith Organization’s Kerukeion, we can’t win.”

“I just hope they’re too busy dealing with everything else…”

“We’re stuck in the same boat, so we’re dead either way.”

Quenser grabbed a floating plastic tank and handed it to Catherine. The three of them swam onwards with their heads above water. They wanted to climb up onto solid ground again, but they could not be picky. Although they did feel a squeezing at their hearts when they saw some torn cables hanging from the ceiling and scattering sparks just above the water’s surface.

“I hope they have an emergency drainage pump like submarines do,” said Catherine.

“Was this place even designed for a situation like this? I mean, an asteroid fell on it.”

Their conversation was cut short by an unpleasant creaking.

The idiots looked to the tall ceiling.

“Please tell me the wound isn’t widening again…”

“The ceiling’s a lot taller this time, so we should have some room to spare.”

“Did you forget about those wires hanging down earlier, Heivia!? If the water level rises any further, we’ll be roasted!!”

“!! Hurry, hurry!!”

But then something unexpected happened.

The water level actually dropped. Their eye level noticeably lowered and their feet reached the floor. The filthy seawater remained at ankle level, but that was far better than feeling the salty flavor fill their mouth every time they breathed.

“But why?”

“There may have been an unflooded area below,” suggested Catherine. “When the wound widened, the water may have fallen there.”

In addition to what areas were flooded and unflooded, the waterproofing could change things. If they shut all the waterproof doors now, they might be able to secure plenty of oxygen even

below the flood line. It was like creating an empty space when screwing up in a falling block puzzle.

But if another wall or ceiling broke, the water would flow in and they would drown.

“Does that mean someone might have just lost their lives? In exchange for saving ours…”

“It’s like a miniature version of war. Including how your actions can influence the lives of people you’ve never even seen.”

Quenser and the others’ safety was not guaranteed. They may have just been lucky as the seesaw tilted back and forth. They wanted to keep moving as soon as they could.

Heivia waved around his soaked military handgun.

“Fresh water is one thing, but seawater can be a problem. Catherine, how’s your gun?”

“It’s probably fine. Big brother, you have no gun like always, right?”

The powered suits were a tight fit, so the spare weapons they could bring with them were limited. They only had those two handguns to fight with. A backpack would have been too bulky, so Quenser had no Hand Axe on him.

They cautiously progressed and closed every waterproof door they came across, but they could only say that was “better than nothing”. If the wall burst open and seawater poured in, it would all be for naught.

“That thing sure is dangerous,” said Heivia as he looked up. “It’s even showing up here.”

The ceiling should have been tall, but it suddenly lowered at a certain point. But this was not due to the building’s structure. The ceiling had been crushed down and they could see black lustrous rock breaking through. And Second Venice was an artificial island of aluminum and reinforced stainless steel, so it had no natural rock.

“Is that a piece of the Appetizer Asteroid?”

“We might have made our way underneath that ‘domed stadium’ we saw in the distance.”

That sent a chill down their spines. That weight was enough for Second Venice to creak as a whole and to allow seawater inside, and it was hanging up above them with no pillars or wires to support it. Who could say when it would crush these puny humans.

“I’m actually glad I don’t have any Hand Axe this time. I wouldn’t want to disturb that thing.”

This area had apparently been flooded at times depending on the exact conditions because a few soaked corpses were lying around.

But these were a little different from the Faith Organization ones.

“Their equipment is different. Are they Information Alliance?”

“They have the same uniforms and rifles, so they’re probably still the Faith Organization’s Kerukeion. They might have had different duties or ranks. Like some guarded the outside while the others did the actual work inside.”

Heivia rolled up one corpse’s sleeve and found the staff and twin snakes tattoo.

The main reason they bothered to check was the corpses’ faces.

“Those are gas masks, aren’t they?”

“They look like octopus aliens,” said Catherine as she reached for one of the masks.

Instead of trying to look at the corpse’s face, she twisted the cylindrical filter and removed it.

She traced her finger across the alphabetic writing on the metal surface before taking it apart and checking inside.

Quenser frowned while leaning over like they were peered inside the same lunchbox.

“Hey, this isn’t activated carbon. What is it? Does it have a drying agent inside?”

“Those masks come in a lot of different types, but this isn’t to protect against poison gas. If it’s removing the moisture, it must be

to protect against something biological."

"Biological…? So like a bacteriological weapon!?"

"I've never heard of a drying agent being used against bacteria…"

"That might not be it," cut in Catherine with her blonde braid. "When I piloted my Object, I remember being told to watch out for this kind of microscopic sabotage in addition to simple firepower. And there was one thing I was warned about in addition to poison gas and viruses. And I think the countermeasure was a drying agent."

"What was it?"

Catherine readily answered Quenser's question.

"Mold. Deadly mold."

Part 3

This was the situation according to Catherine:

"Acquiring a strange virus or bacteria isn't easy and it's hard to maintain their destructive ability. It's an emergency if they escape and, since they're alive, you have to look after them or they'll die. You can't just leave them in an airtight container. They're known as cheap weapons, but it isn't actually that easy."

"Well, yeah. It would be like living in the same room as some influenza with a 0% survival rate."

Heivia agreed but did not seem to get her point.

Quenser was also out of his element when it came to biology.

"So how is that deadly mold different? Don't you still have to look after a creature that kills you if you breathe it in?"

"Not necessarily." Catherine giggled. "It's called deadly mold, but the mold itself can't kill you. The mold can be found anywhere. You just have to alter the genetics of the black stuff that grows between

your kitchen or bathroom tiles.”

“But that can’t kill anyone, right?”

“Right.” The small girl readily nodded. “So the mold itself is just the carrier. The toxin that kills people is something else.”

“…”

“It can be blowfish or aconite. You just have to make a microscopic powder out of it and mix it with the ever-growing mold. There’s a ton of specialized equipment here, but you really only need to make some slight adjustments to the safe country kitchen equipment to let bread dough ferment. Then when the supposedly harmless mold spreads, the people who breathe it in start dropping like flies.”

“Ugh,” groaned Heivia. “That comes up in a legend about Napoleon, doesn’t it? His health continued to decline while he was kept imprisoned and he finally died a mysterious death, but scholars still argue over whether it was something occult or an assassination. But one theory was that a toxin and the mold in the wallpaper mixed together and slowly ate into his body.”

“I don’t know if this is the same, but I have heard about pollen, dead mites, or other allergens getting in mold.”

“The deadly mold is nothing more than a carrier, so you can control the extent of the damage,” said Catherine. “Even if the mold grows more than expected, the deadly part only comes from the separate toxin. That deadly part can’t be copied, so there’s no fear of it mutating into something incredibly toxic.”

Catherine’s answer was so perfect that Quenser felt a chill down his spine.

“And both the type and density of the material carried by the mold can be controlled. You can make everyone cough up blood and die or you can put them all safely to sleep. To put it another way, it might be easier to think of the mold as a tiny pill or injection.”

“Is there anything it can’t do…?”

It was obvious just how stubborn a life form mold was by the fact that everyone was constantly fighting it in their bathrooms with a sponge and cleaner in hand. The reproducing mold and the deadly toxin were separate, so it could not mutate into something

uncontrollable, but it was still not a pleasant idea.

“That would explain why the Rush’s Oh Ho Ho was so desperate to keep everyone here. Mold spores can travel overseas on travelers’ shoes, can’t they?”

Even if they scattered absolute alcohol or lime across the entire city, they could not fully eliminate the mold growing in it. From the grout between tiles to dirt, some would definitely be missed. Even burning the entire city to the ground might not be enough.

And even if not all of it was deadly, the possibility remained, so the entire city would have to be sterilized before they could relax. It may have been the same fear as a minefield.

“But what toxin was Kerukeion planning to have the mold spread to the entire world from this infection base? No one can make a serum or antidote without knowing that.”

“We might be able to figure that out with this.” Catherine looked to the gas mask filter she had opened. “The drying agent would kill the mold, but the toxin itself would remain since it’s a chemical. Just like with a water purifier’s filter, it would all build up here.”

If that was true, they did not need to stay in the infection base any longer. They would need to find an exit and return to Frolaytia at the maintenance base.

However, Catherine’s theory assumed something.

“But wait. That assumes the deadly mold has already been disseminated. If that hasn’t happened yet, there wouldn’t be any in the air and this filter would be clean. The people handling the deadly mold may have worn the gas masks as standard etiquette.”

It was unclear whether the Rush’s Oh Ho Ho had actually sealed off the island *after* the deadly mold had been released. It was possible she had done so preemptively.

“Come to think of it, our busty commander said they didn’t find anything in the nearby soil or Myonri’s blood. Same for you, Quenser.”

“The mold is found everywhere, so they might have just overlooked it,” said Catherine with uncertainty in her voice.

If the deadly mold had yet to be released, leaving would be the worst choice. They would have been in arm's reach of the greatest threat but turned back and thus allowed the deadly mold to spread through Second Venice.

Quenser sighed.

"Catherine, let's take that mask with us. And just to be sure, we should investigate the infection base's dissemination equipment. If it hasn't activated yet, we might be able to stop it. And if the mold is never released, the Rush will have no more reason to keep everyone here."

"…Right."

The blonde braid girl sounded reluctant, but she still nodded.

She reattached the can-like filter to the mask and placed it on the side of her head like at an Island Nation festival. She likely wanted both hands free for her handgun. It had been on the pale face of a drowned corpse, but she did not seem to mind.

"Where's the heart of the infection base? Is there a map anywhere? This underground facility is huge, so wouldn't the people using it get lost?"

"Heivia, are you the kind of person that gets lost at home if you don't have doorplates?"

"You clearly don't know how many rooms my home has. I'm a noble, remember?"

They did not find anything for a while.

They occasionally ran across a drowned corpse, but that did not provide any new information.

With the giant asteroid blocking the way above them, they continued deeper and deeper until they finally found it.

"Wait, wait, wait. This looks dangerous."

That was Heivia's opinion of what he saw.

Unlike everything they had seen before, one room had been kept separate with clear glass. The entrance used an airlock, so it definitely seemed designed to prevent microbes from getting in or

out.

They saw no one inside.

The glass walls had shattered from the asteroid impact and only the frames remained on the floor.

In the center was what looked like a broken water tank with a water-filled container inside that looked something like a pot or a spring. A thick metal pipe ran straight down, so it was likely connected to some kind of liquid inside. When the plug was released, the microbes would be sent throughout Second Venice, mixed with the soil-improving agar powder, and scattered across the city.

And something was soaking in the center of the witch's pot.

It was a synthetic bag the size of a college notebook.

Assuming it was not a bag of pre-made curry…

"Oh, no… The deadly mold has already been set up!!"

Heivia held a hand to his mouth as he shouted his warning, but Quenser frowned and stepped over a corpse to reach the center and all its shattered glass.

"Hey, Quenser. That's dangerous!!"

"No, wait. Look at this."

Quenser focused on the industrial computers surrounding the broken water tank and large pot. Most of the monitors had broken, but one of them displayed a warning window.

Catherine approached and read it.

"An unexpected error has occurred. Would you like to restart the work task? Or would you like to continue?"

"Good. I don't know if it was the impact or the switch to backup power, but it stopped running and hasn't started back up! If we remove the curry from the pot, we can stop it from disseminating!!"

Quenser quickly turned around and reached toward the bag at the bottom of the pot.

And a moment later, he heard a dry gunshot.

Before trying to find where it had come from or ducking down on reflex, Quenser stared at the deadly mold package.

It had a hole in it.

The hole was only as large as a fingertip, but it had torn apart around that as well.

“Big brother!!”

Catherine grabbed his hips and then swept his feet out from under him. They both fell onto the glass-covered floor, but he could not say for sure that not a single drop of the bag’s liquid had reached him. He had been soaking wet to begin with, so he could not say what was seawater and what was the grim reaper’s seeds.

“You son of a bitch!!”

A few more gunshots sounded. Heivia had shot the drowned corpse that Quenser had stepped over earlier. Except the man must have actually been alive, even if just barely.

Catherine lay on top of Quenser and shouted to Heivia.

“Just grab that guy’s mask!! Hurry!!”

The blonde braid girl reached for the gas mask on the side of her own head. The deadly mold had already been released. The infection base’s work task was still stopped and there may not have been any immediate risk of it escaping the facility, but this room was a different matter.

And between the half-drowned soldier Heivia had killed and Catherine, they only had two gas masks.

One of them would be left out.

“Dammit…”

Quenser relaxed his entire body as the small girl lay on top of him.

“I’ll just give up here. But promise me you’ll bring me an antidote or vaccine or whatever before I run out of time…”

This was not his specialty, but even he knew it was not that simple.

There were plenty of so-called “killer viruses”, but it took years to develop a vaccine after a sample was acquired. And a lot of them were still far from a successful vaccine. Antidotes were developed for chemical toxins, but the initial amount consumed or a delay in treatment often left the victim suffering from severe after-effects.

But as all that passed through his head, something unexpected happened.

While lying on top of Quenser, Catherine pressed her gas mask onto his face.

At first, he did not understand.

And once he realized what Catherine Blueangel’s choice meant, he yelled at her.

“Wait, Catherine! Wait!! Do you understand what you’re doing!?”

He tried to grab the mask pressed against his face, but Catherine kept him from moving by using her legs to hold his torso and arms in place. He tried to move his hips to knock her off of him, but she was holding him solidly to the ground.

Meanwhile, Catherine’s hands moved along the mask. She grabbed the elastic bands and attached it to Quenser’s head.

Quenser shouted over at his unrestrained friend.

“Heivia, do something!! At this rate…!!”

“It’s too late. I’ve been exposed for too long. Placing the mask on me now wouldn’t solve anything. Removing the mask now would only get us both infected, big brother.”

“…!!”

That clearly stopped Heivia from moving after he put on the mask he had stolen from the soldier he had killed.

“…That’s fine.”

Unable to move anything else, Quenser desperately moved his mouth.

“That’s fine!! I won’t leave you all alone!! I was asked to help bring you back to a safe country and I swear I will! Why do you have to

give up your own mask!?”



Quenser was shouting so loud he thought his throat would tear, but the girl’s lips relaxed slightly as she sat on top of him.

“That’s the last stamp…”

Her body shook.

She collapsed forward.

“ ‘Think about what you can do for a friend in need’…”

It may have helped that she had been lying on top of him already. As her face approached his, her soft lips bumped into his gas mask’s filter can.

It was a flavorless kiss.

After that, she did not wake back up.

“Goddammit…”

Quenser was finally able to pull his arms out from between the girl’s legs. He wrapped his arms around the Pilot Elite’s abnormally hot back and embraced her with his trembling hands.

With the mask in place, he could not even wipe away his tears.

“Goddammit!! I won’t let it end like this!! Help me, Heivia!! Catherine completed everything for the Civilian Acclimation Assistance System, so I swear I’ll send her to a safe country. We should be able to keep the spread of the deadly mold to a minimum right now!!”

“R-right. Right!!”

Quenser and Heivia both wore the masks they had gained in exchange for someone else’s life and they ran around the heart of the destroyed infection base.

“There has to be some kind of emergency method. It can be lime or absolute alcohol, but there has to be a kit for sterilizing the facility in case a microbe gets out!!”

“There’s something inside this locked cabinet. It’s the powder used to draw lines on the schoolyard during an athletic festival!”

“That’s lime! Heivia, break the glass if you have to, but scatter that around!!”

“What about you!?”

“We can’t disinfect inside Catherine’s mouth, so we have to throw her in a body bag and duct tape up the zipper to keep any more from getting out. She’ll still have two or three hours of air and the

mold spores should be larger than pollen. It's less precise than a virus weapon, so it should be fine!!"

"Oh, I hope you're right, dammit!!"

Whatever the case, it was a race against time. The fact that everything was soaked from the flooding was a real problem. If the deadly mold began to spread at an accelerated rate, they would have to seal everything off. And that included Quenser and Heivia. If that happened, there would be nothing they could do.

That was the major deciding factor in whether or not they could bring Catherine back to the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion's maintenance base zone.

Even if there was no vaccine or antidote and even if they could only fight the symptoms, there was specialized equipment and military doctors there. That would be far better than anything Quenser and Heivia could do.

After sealing up the body bag with duct tape, they poured a bunch of lime powder on it. This girl had saved his life, so it drove Quenser insane that he had to treat her like she was unclean.

"Will that do it!?"

"I don't know, but at least we haven't passed out yet."

But things were not over yet.

The heavens shook.

"……
Oh, please no."

Heivia groaned as he looked up.

Something gigantic was moving above their heads.

What looked like black rock was actually a 100 meter piece of the Appetizer Asteroid after it had been broken by the Princess's anti-air lasers. Or so they had thought.

Had they been wrong?

If it was moving, they had to be wrong.

That black rock had looked so sturdy, but now cracks ran through it from within. And several metal towers came into view. No, that was wrong too. The scale was simply so large that they could not see the whole picture from here. That had only made it look like a wall and towers.

If they had been able to step back and view it more calmly, it may have looked different.

They would have seen a 50 meter spherical main body with cannons covering its surface. That colossal weapon could move at more than 500 kph, it had ended the nuclear age, and it contained a JPlevelMHD reactor that provided the firepower for the giant main cannons which were the one thing that could exterminate others like it.

“What dumbass did this!? Were the parts carried ‘up there’ and then constructed like a ship in a bottle!? Was that Object actually embedded inside the Appetizer Asteroid!? Was it hiding there like that was a ghillie suit made of heat insulation and cushioning!?”

The Princess’s anti-air attack had destroyed the giant asteroid and caused it to detonate in midair, but now that they thought about it, it had split apart a little too cleanly. It may have been customized to do that from the beginning. By cutting into and cracking the asteroid with an Object’s firepower, it had been remade into a vehicle for reentry.

But which world power had done it?

Was it the Faith Organization’s Kerukeion who had planned to disseminate the deadly mold? Or was it someone who wanted to stop that by destroying the infection base even if it meant crushing Second Venice?

It had been constructed in space, embedded inside the asteroid, and accurately dropped toward the surface. Its internal systems and the Pilot Elite would also have to have been perfectly preserved, so an unimaginable amount of technology had been poured into this. It would undoubtedly be a cutting edge Generation 2.

“Goddammit… Is this why that old astronomer was attacked? The asteroid was named after him, so he must have checked it on a daily basis. Did he notice something was up, so they came to silence him?”

Quenser Barbotage had come to the battlefield to learn about Object design, but his eyes were not sparkling now.

“Shut up, you…”

He picked up the body bag holding the girl who had saved his life and viscerally felt the approaching time limit. That unarmed boy did not even have Hand Axe this time and his expression was hidden by a mask.

The puny human only had one thing to say.

“This is *not* the time, you idiot!! Do you *want* me to tear you apart right this instant!?”

Part 4

“Oh, dear.”

Out at sea, the Information Alliance’s Second Generation Gatling 033 detected the change in Second Venice.

She also glanced over at the swimsuit 3D model in another small window.

“So the Faith Organization’s Coilgun 052 has started moving. Oh ho ho. And I thought it had been smashed to pieces by the impact of the fall.”

Kerukeion had been targeting the infection base since before the asteroid incident, but the Information Alliance’s defenses had been too strong and they had had trouble in their attack.

The Appetizer Asteroid had likely been their Plan B.

The asteroid had made a mess of everything, so the Information Alliance military guards had fallen apart and Kerukeion had taken the facility. However, Kerukeion seemed to have had their own difficulties inside the flooded facility, but there was no need to sympathize with them.

Oh Ho Ho did not know whether Pathogen X had already been

disseminated or if that was yet to come. She did not know whether it was fast acting or slow acting. She was not even sure if her higher ups had any accurate information. Her unit's soldiers had only been issued masks that resembled full-face helmets, collapsible raincoat-like suits, and antibiotics that were general-purpose but had powerful side effects. Since they had not received a specific vaccine or antidote, she guessed that Pathogen X's identity had yet to be determined.

But that was why the island needed to be quarantined in advance. If a deadly virus with an extremely long incubation period was spreading and seemingly healthy tourists unwittingly carried it back to their various countries, multiple pandemics could begin around the world. And Second Venice had originally belonged to the Information Alliance, so more of the wealthy visitors were from their countries than any other world power.

If Pathogen X's identity was unknown, allowing it spread in the safe countries would cause a great number of sacrifices. If it took five to ten years to fully develop a solution from scratch, several nations could truly sink into a sea of blood.

"Hmm. This isn't a great position for an idol dependent on popularity. Oh ho ho."

So she would stop this here, no matter what kind of misunderstandings the world made.

Between her hidden side and public side, she was needed as the Pilot Elite who controlled bloody wars more than as the swimsuit idol that was dancing on the screen.

"But playing the villain from time to time can be exciting."

The Idol Elite licked her lips with her small tongue and guessed that the situation must have changed for the Coilgun 052 to stop playing dead now.

Had Pathogen X begun to spread or had some kind of failure led them to shift to Plan C?

As the one enforcing the quarantine, she had to assume the worst. What if the Coilgun 052 had confirmed that Pathogen X had covered Second Venice, so it was going to destroy Oh Ho Ho's Gatling 033 before making an indiscriminate attack on Second Venice?

Dead men tell no tales.

If they only had to be carriers for Pathogen X, then the people did not need to be alive. They could still infect people even if their bodies were sent back to their families. It was unknown how many of the people in Second Venice knew about the infection base, but if they were all killed, it would naturally delay the discovery.

Oh Ho Ho did not know if that was an accurate analysis of the situation.

But to maintain the quarantine, she had to act as long as it was possible. If she chose to be optimistic, she could not eliminate all risk of something escaping. When someone heard a cold was going around, they might decide they should wash out their mouth and wash their hands, but if no one at their school thought it was a big deal and they decided they were overthinking things, the entire school could be wiped out.

She could not let her conviction be shaken by the situation around her. Her decision to quarantine them had to be absolute.

“Release Strategic AI Juliet. The Gatling 033 will now engage with the red target designated Coilgun 052 which has appeared within Second Venice. Requesting authorization.”

She sent a radio transmission to the maintenance base zone as a sort of ritual, but it was essentially meaningless. If she was restricted from doing something, they would contact her regardless. And if nothing was restricted, then she was free to do as she wished. There had been a few restrictions so far, but there had not been a word about not fighting an enemy object or not getting Second Venice involved.

As expected, the response arrived before she could count to three.

“Understood, Gatling 033. But you cannot eject inside the estimated infected area. Lose here and you die. So do not play around with the calculations and use the optimal answer calculated out by Juliet. …Do you understand?”

As her commander with long silver hair and brown skin responded, her tone dropped for the last sentence.

Oh Ho Ho did not say anything, but she did laugh quietly.

(Honestly, she's letting her personal feelings influence her.)

She switched modes and the processing power focused on a single task. The 3D model dance footage closed and it all shifted toward the coming battle.

"Authorization confirmed. Engage. Oh ho ho. Let's get this started!!"

Part 5

The blue sky was visible.

The heavy black rock covering everything overhead had been removed.

Pieces of insulating material and cushioning larger than cars were raining down, but Quenser did not bother getting down on the ground.

Heivia groaned and was helpless to do anything but watch through his gas mask.

"H-hey. Is this okay? If we didn't decontaminate all of the deadly mold, it might get out!!"

"Quiet, Heivia. Dump the lime powder in that bag over my head. And take care of Catherine. With the top open, our radio signals should get through now, so tell Frolaytia to send in some fully-protected doctors and medics."

"What about you!?"

"You have to ask?"

Quenser left his awful friend with the body bag containing the survivor. After the sterilizing lime was poured over his head, he looked up at the most dangerous weapon in the world.

And he spoke in a horrifyingly emotionless voice.

"We need to have Catherine retrieved as soon as possible. I'll

destroy everything that gets in our way."

"Are you serious… Quenser!?"

He did not listen or wait around any longer.

The surface was about three stories up, but the large pieces of rock(?) dropped by the mystery Object proved useful. By climbing up a pile of rubble, he managed to crawl to the surface even without the knowledge and physical fitness of a mountain or cliff climber.

He appeared in the west side which was especially damaged and was mostly a giant pile of rubble now.

The partially-destroyed skyscrapers had all fallen now and a new giant structure had taken root on the ground. This had to be the first time to actually move the weapon after landing. Its multiple cannons moved around and the lenses and sensors whirred, so it seemed to be checking on its functionality like some warmup exercises or stretches.

Quenser ignored that.

He paid the Object no heed and ran into a half-collapsed discount store nearby.

There was one thing he wanted.

(It can be cold medicine, sugar, vaporized gasoline, hydrogen peroxide water, or whatever else. Even if it isn't as powerful or stable, I need something I can use in place of Hand Axe!!)

Quenser stuck a basket inside the shopping cart and ran around the store dumping in product after product from the half-collapsed shelves. After making a full circuit and reaching the register counter, he tore off the packaging without paying. He put the necessary substances in the necessary containers to create explosives and detonation fuses.

He could perform a number of chemical experiments, but what he needed was separation and synthesis.

He could distill things with a vacuum coffee maker and he could manage centrifugal separation with a lawnmower that's blades rotated with a gasoline engine. Soaking things in high-purity

alcohol or using a water purifier filter would also be effective. The hand-cranked generator for an emergency radio allowed electrolysis and the drying agent in snack packages meant he could dehydrate things. By drawing out only the “pure components” from the various commercial products, he could concentrate them and easily recombine them into a devilish invention.

A heavy tremor ran through the area.

The Object had likely done something outside. Even the slightest mistake on his part could blow off his fingers or his face and it was possible he could be buried alive, but Quenser’s expression did not change. The modern alchemist’s eyes were focused on the movements of the chemicals as he closed them inside 500mm beer bottles. He could have used soda cans or water bottles as containers, but glass had always been the strongest to chemicals. Its fragility to impacts was a downside, but it was better than having the bottom burn away as soon as he poured the contents inside.

He ended up with ten bottles.

He wrapped different colors of plastic tape around the top to indicate what was inside each one.

He placed them inside a cushioned camera bag he found in the store and stuffed balled up newspaper between the bottles to fill the gaps as much as possible.

“This really isn’t going to help much.”

With a self-deprecating smile, Quenser zipped up the camera bag.

Even after all this, a heavy impact from outside would easily break the bottles and Quenser would be blown away if conditions were just right, but he could not be picky now.

He needed to focus on time more than anything.

Time was what Catherine did not have.

After a nod, he carried the camera bag in one hand and ran out of the half-destroyed discount store despite the danger.

He once more looked up at the mystery Second Generation.

Whatever its reason, this Object had made sure to appear on Second

Venice itself, so that allowed him to make some guesses.

“I was right. It is an air cushion type. And it uses multiple legs instead of a flat skirt.”

Four long ski-like floats extended back from directly below the spherical main body. They were not all the same length. The outer two were longer in the back and the inner two were shorter. The inner two were likely there to supports its weight while the outer two were there to help with quick turns and high-speed mobility. On the front, it had insect-like legs that spread out to the left and right.

After all, Second Venice was a city of countless intersecting canals, so not even a car could drive through it. Unlike the Baby Magnum on the coast or the Rush watching over the island from the ocean, a static electricity method that required separate floats would not work in the city.

Also, the mystery Object had lifted itself up to the surface with no assistance. A skirt-style would not be able to overcome that large height difference.

That eliminated some unnecessary work for Quenser.

Every minute and second counted for his small savior.

“Its main cannon looks like it uses metal shells. …Is it a railgun? No, it might be a simpler coilgun. They’d want the simplest method to prevent anything from breaking during the impact of landing.”

It had a single main cannon sticking out from the front, but it was short for how thick it was. A coilgun used the power of electromagnets to accelerate a steel shell, so the more electromagnets, the greater the power. That was why the barrel was usually as long as possible.

But this mystery Object had not done that.

Quenser’s attention turned to the secondary cannons attached all around it. They and the main cannon seemed to be built from similar units. It was like they were cobbled together from the same toy blocks. If the secondary cannons were a single block, then the main cannon was three of those blocks attached end to end. Either they were hoping a single blast would be powerful enough or it was specialized for battling other Objects, because it had fewer

secondary cannons than a normal Object.

(Were they trying to reduce production and maintenance costs by reusing the same parts? Or are they spares in case the main cannon is taken out?)

It did not matter either way.

All that mattered to Quenser was the main cannon's relative lack of range.

An Object shell would blow him to pieces either way.

The student unzipped the camera back while bringing his radio to his mouth.

"Can you hear me, Princess? Can you target the mystery Object?"

"What's going on, Quenser? Your voice sounds weird."

"I don't care if it's only as a stationary gun platform. Can you target the mystery Object?"

"I can't avoid a counter punch, so I have to take it out in one shot."

"Then I'll give you that chance. You pull the trigger and kill it."

The handmade supplies gathered from a discount store by a combat engineer in training had more or less zero chance of destroying a cutting-edge strategic weapon that cost 5 billion dollars.

But things changed when he could borrow another Object's firepower. He did not need to worry about the nuke-resistant armor and he only had to give his ally a chance to fire.

He had to do everything as quickly as possible.

The mystery Object's legs shook. Its greatest threat would be the Rush out at sea, so it may have been planning to use its air cushion engine to head out onto the ocean. Once truly started using that air cushion engine, Quenser would be blown into the wall by the violent winds just from being nearby.

So he took action before that could happen.

He pulled a bottle with red plastic tape from the camera bag and made an underhand throw toward the ground below the floating

mystery Object.

It happened as soon as the bottle broke.

A mass of bubbles grew larger than a tour bus.

Certain chemicals would release a large quantity of gas when they reacted to something.

The most common examples were found in fire extinguishers and airbags. Some people had their nose broken by the safety device meant to protect them, so it could become a weapon if used right. However, it would be difficult to damage an Object with that.

So that was just one step.

Mixing that chemical with detergent would great a massive amount of bubbles as soon as the air burst out. (Assuming you chose one that did not interfere with the chemical reaction) mixing it with acid would add a powerful corrosive effect to the bubbles.

No matter how hard they were and even with the muscle-like shock absorption ability of the multi-layered onion armor, it still used special steel at the base.

And there was no need to dissolve all of the armor. The air cushion engine used the power of air to keep the entire Object afloat. If the separated pieces of armor and bubbles rushed in and filled those holes, it would stop for maybe a second or two.

And that second was enough.

That was all the time Catherine had after it had been carved away by some inconsiderate bastard.

As soon as he saw the mystery Object come to a jerking halt, Quenser whispered into his radio.

“Do it.”

Bluish-white light filled the world. From ten kilometers away, the Princess’s low-stability plasma cannon wove through the gaps between Second Venice’s buildings and mercilessly pierced the center of the mystery Object.

That meant the utter destruction of the reactor and the cockpit.

The out-of-control energy would quickly cause the Object to explode and the nuke-resistant armor would open like a flower.

No.

That was what *should* have happened.

“Wha-…?”

The lenses attached to the sides of the main cannon continued to whirr.

The mystery Object had a donut-like hole through the center, but it ignored that and quickly turned toward the attacker. It aimed its large caliber coilgun toward the Baby Magnum.

Quenser’s eyes could not keep up with the rest.

The air cushion gale lifted him from the ground and slammed his back into a nearby pile of rubble.

“Gah…ahhh!?”

His scream was drowned out by another roar.

The mystery Object’s coilgun had fired. He was only watching from the side, but his entire body was pierced by a shock that seemed to damage both his eardrums and his lungs.

The Princess was stuck as a stationary gun platform and could not move. Now that the first shot had failed, she would be unilaterally destroyed.

But she still sounded calm over the radio.

“Quenser?”

“Cough! Cough!! Sorry. I have no idea what happened!! Why is it still alive!? And why are you!?”

“That short barrel coilgun isn’t suited for long-range battles, so my onion armor somehow managed to stop it. But if it gets close, I’m in trouble. It’ll blow me away.”

“Ugh. But only if it has the chance.”

The mystery Object began moving for real.

However, it did not approach the Baby Magnum. It raced through the city of rubble to reach the nearest coast and quickly head out onto the ocean.

“So it’s top priority is the undamaged Rush.”

“That pisses me off.”

“How can you say that when that means you’re safe for now? More importantly, continue acting as a stationary gun platform and fire your main cannon if you see an opportunity! Even if that doesn’t work, continue targeting it to restrict its movements!!”

“Where exactly am I supposed to shoot it? I already shot through that Zombie Object’s heart…”

Quenser ignored the creaking pain in his spine and got up. The camera bag…was fine. His body had cushioned the blow.

He was unsteady, but he ran through the city of rubble. He would never even dream of catching up to an Object on foot. Some fancy pro-sports motorboats that had to cost $200,000 each were stopped alongside a wide canal and he jumped from one to another.

“Frolaytia! How much have you heard about Catherine? The Zombie Object is on its way to the ocean. Can you retrieve Catherine and Heivia from the infection base!?”

“We can’t send any helicopters with the Rush and the unknown Object out there. I sent out a doctor and some medics on a spare hovercraft, but if that Object fires even the smallest cannon at them on a whim, it’s all over. That Second Generations might be made for fighting other Objects and not people, but it should be able to easily locate a target as big as a boat.”

“Then I’ll open the way.”

As he jumped across the boats and peered in near the helm, he spotted something.

One of them had been abandoned during the asteroid detonation with the key still in the ignition.

The boy could not drive a car or motorcycle, but for some reason, he had a fair bit of experience with marine sports.

Part 6

Oh Ho Ho laughed mockingly as she maintained her blockade.

First her Gatling 033 then an indiscriminate attack on Second Venice. It was all so boringly predictable.

She had been a little surprised when the Coilgun 052 survived being shot through the center, but that was unimportant. Its important "innards" were likely made so they could be lifted up to change their position. That kind of cheap trick only worked the first time and would be useless once word got out. All that remained was for the battle to reveal the fragility introduced by the unnecessary design element.

As proof, it had fired on the stationary Legitimacy Kingdom First Generation and yet had not destroyed it. There appeared to have been some kind of accident, but getting pierced through the center by a stationary gun platform on the very first shot was unthinkable for a footwork-focused Object.

And if it had intentionally allowed the hit, it made no sense for that First Generation to have survived the main cannon blast afterwards. The risks outweighed the returns.

"You've evolved in an odd direction like an ancient extinct creature that walked on its nose, haven't you? Oh ho ho."

It was said that very little personal playfulness could remain in an Object because so many people's desires were involved in a construction plan costing 5 billion dollars.

But at the same time, projects worth so very much were hard to stop once the ball got rolling. Everyone might have a bad feeling and know they had been wrong, but canceling the project would mean shouldering a massive loss, so they would end up continuing on.

Objects as a whole had evolved in an unnecessary direction in order to defeat the nuclear age.

And at the Second Generation, they had grown even more sharply specialized and tricky. That was how Objects with somewhat

mistaken designs ended up strutting across the world.

Stories in which weapons always hit on the optimum answer as time passed and as technology evolved were only found in the fictional wars of paperbacks and electronic books written to take advantage of the war boom. No matter how old they got and no matter what position they held, the actual adults were nothing but imbeciles. No one ever truly matured.

Oh Ho Ho felt pity.

Even if the adults could let the stone roll away for their own benefit, the Pilot Elite could not leave the Object. If they had been "adjusted" for an Object with a flawed design philosophy, they would be forced to accept contradictory strategic theories and use every trick they could to face the cutting-edge wars. It was like being given a loincloth to wear and told guts and willpower were the key to victory while all your marathon opponents had been trained based on sports science in a clean laboratory.

She faced the Zombie Object as it hovered out onto the ocean.

She showed no respect.

The Information Alliance Idol Elite gave a proclamation of death while continuing to look down on it from a position of pity.

"It's time for a test to see if you can still move around after being sliced into tiny pieces. Oh ho ho."

The two great masses moved.

The Coilgun 052's main cannon had failed to defeat a motionless First Generation at long distance. That naturally meant it was meant for close-range.

But that was the Gatling 033's specialty.

The large caliber, short barrel coilgun's only advantage was a simple design that made it hard to break. Just as Oh Ho Ho had announced, the power of twin rapid-fire beam Gatling cannons could slice even a nuke-resistant Object in two if it scored a clean hit.

And Oh Ho Ho also had the greater skill in close-range footwork.

The Gatling 033 worked best on the ground where its chainsaw-like treads could work along with its air cushion for high-speed dashes, but the Coilgun 052 had already been shot through the center and its center of gravity and air resistance would be a mess. Her enemy had the greater handicap, so Oh Ho Ho had no reason not to outdo them.

She swung her right main cannon around.

It fired thousands of shots a minute. They blurred together into a single bluish-white beam of light that instantly burned horizontally through the world.

Oh Ho Ho knew the damaged Coilgun 052 could never dodge that. In fact, it would have been impossible even without the damage.

With a direct hit to the spherical main body, the onion armor peeled away and orange sparks flew as if she were welding a wall.

But…

"…!? It isn't…burning through!?"

The Idol Elite gasped when she saw the result of the "sword" strike.

And then she realized something.

"It isn't the damage that's making the onion armor peel away. Is it a type of reactive armor!?"

Reactive armor had been developed to protect tanks from chemical energy weapons such as rockets. The thin armor panels kept in a case as thick as a phonebook would be lifted up by an explosion to randomly scatter the rocket's blast and stop the flames and impact from piercing the armor like a spear.

This Object carved away its own armor in the same way.

When designing a car, it was important to intentionally make the frame soft. That was to absorb the impact of an accident that would otherwise reach the driver. The idea of building in areas intended to be destroyed was also seen in earthquake-proof buildings and water barriers that prevented the propagation of coal mine explosions. … And if it was used in cars, buildings, and mines, it would of course be used for military purposes as well.

This was the truth of the Zombie Object that could continue moving even after falling to earth with no parachute and only an asteroid for cushioning. It did not deflect things with its solid armor or receive them with its soft shell. It was broken, crushed, and diverted. This self-harming weapon was the polar opposite of the standard image of an Object as the most powerful presence on the battlefield.

“How unique an evolution have you gone through!?”

Rather than its main cannon’s power or its propulsion method, this Second Generation had specialized in its defense. But since it intentionally let the enemy shells hit to use them up while damaging itself, that could hardly be called a specialty in defense.

Or so she thought.

This went beyond even that.

“!?”

A deafening blast came from the Coilgun 052.

But it did not come from the main cannon. It came from the surrounding secondary cannons. They were relatively meaningless in a battle between Objects, but the Zombie Object’s secondary cannons were the same as the main coilgun, just shorter. That shorter length caused the power to drop, but they still caused plenty of damage compared to an anti-personnel or anti-vehicle cannon.

A few of the Gatling 033’s secondary cannons were torn from its spherical main body.

But that did not qualify as any real damage. As already stated, only the main cannon was important in a battle between Objects. It was not easy breaking through the onion armor that not even a nuke could destroy. Even if a few of the secondary cannons were torn away, it could still fight just fine with the armor, main cannons, reactor, cockpit, and propulsion device intact.

But that was not the Zombie Object’s intent.

Its main cannon finally gave a roar.

For some reason, an unpleasant sensation raced down Oh Ho Ho’s back.

A moment later, a great number of needles were released from the main cannon.

It was a needle gun. The main cannon had clearly changed mode since it used a normal shell to attack the Legitimacy Kingdom. Each of these shells was only about the size of a ballpoint pen. A total of 45,000 scattered in a fan-like shape to cover the entire area.

They were small antennae and the electrode on the end had a tank of instant glue attached. And they were targeting the spots where the Gatling 033's secondary cannons had been torn off. Specifically, they targeted the printed circuit board data network that sent electronic signals from the cockpit. In other words, electrodes.

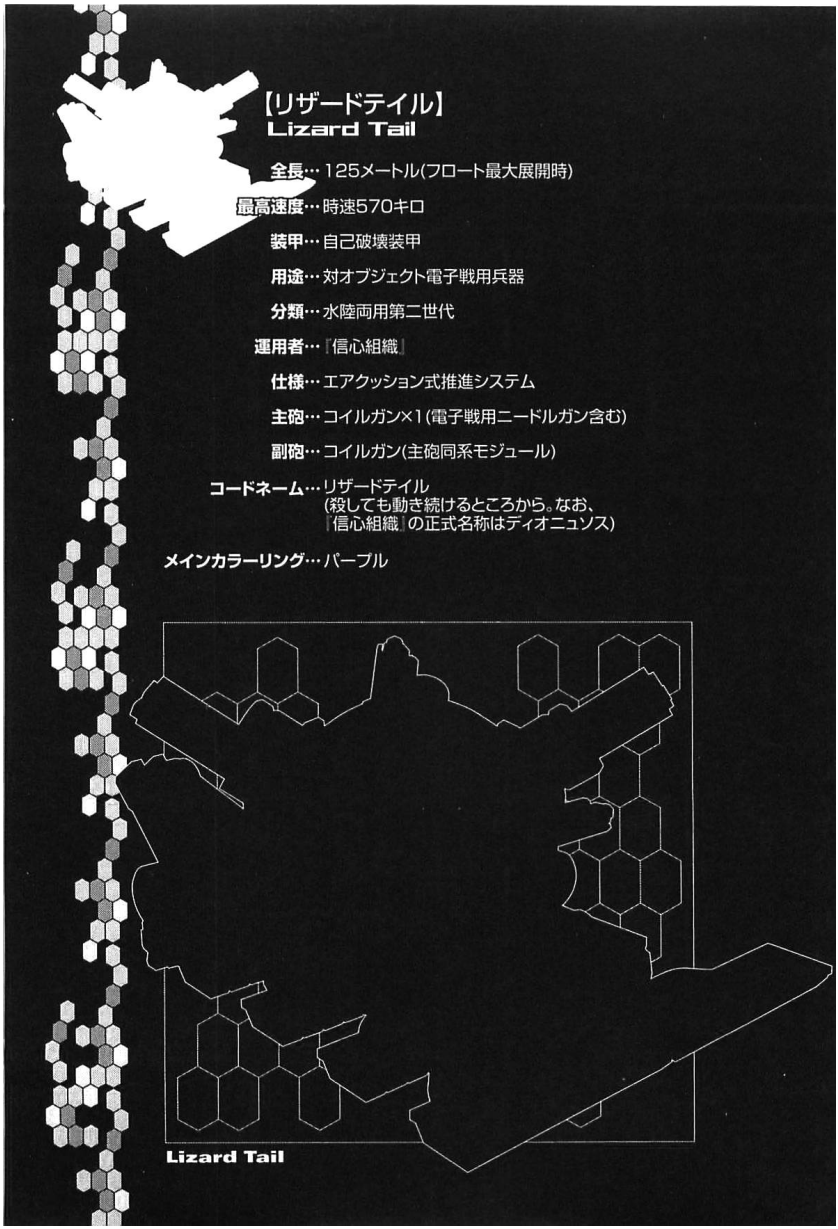
More and more needles rained down.

Most of them attached to the armor panels and accomplished nothing, but only one of them had to attach to the exposed pure gold of the data network.

That created an opening for a cyber-attack, just like sticking a USB drive into a computer to infect it with a virus even though it was disconnected from the network.

Wireless signals began an attack through the small antennae.

"You…!!!???"



Oh Ho Ho frantically grabbed the Gatling 033's reins and quickly had Strategic AI Juliet focus on the cyber battle. The special Information Alliance Object had an entire supercomputer onboard, but a cyber-attack was not determined just by the pure machine specs.

And zombies did more than not die.

They were frightening because they bit people, ate them, infected

them, and increased in number.

It was the despair of finding your neighbor was now baring their fangs and attacking you.

The Gatling 033 came to a quick stop. The Idol Elite choked as the belt squeezed her body.

“You mean it broke through the Information Alliance system!?”

The Gatling 033 was no longer accepting its master’s instructions.

The two Objects lined up alongside each other as they raced across the ocean like an acrobatic military exercise…

Part 7

Quenser used the pro-sports motorboat to practically skip along the canal’s water and out into the nearby ocean. He immediately noticed the change. The mystery Zombie Object and the Information Alliance’s Rush would never begin to race alongside each other like that. Something had clearly happened between the two Objects approaching him…no, approaching Second Venice behind him.

Whatever the case, they were approaching at 500 kph. He would only have one chance as they passed by. If he could not settle this then, he could never catch up. No matter how hard he worked the engine, a normal boat could not reach even half that speed.

Quenser himself did not have a clear answer.

“U-uoooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

They did not care about a tiny fly in their way and they would crush him if he was in their path. Sensing that arrogance, Quenser worked the helm to escape the Zombie Object and the Rush. That may have been his real reason for doing it.

Regardless, he drove into the gap between the two.

Both the Rush and the Zombie Object used air cushion engines. And

they were constantly creating enough wind to keep their 200,000 ton bodies afloat. Quenser should have realized what passing between them would mean.

Gravity seemed to vanish.

The student pictured the ping pong ball floating above a toy pipe.

Yes. The powerful winds created by the two Objects collided between them and created an intense updraft in search of a way out.

The motorboat instantly flipped over and then flew straight up like a leaf. The idiot was no different.

As Quenser was instantly rocketed up the length of a 25 meter pool, his hips bent at an unfortunate angle and he happened to spot something.

A few secondary cannons had been torn from the Rush's side and several pen-sized antennae were stabbed there. They had forcibly connected to the cannon control electrodes that were exposed by the damage, so an opening had been created for a cyber-attack by an extreme short-range wireless signal.

It all happened in an instant, which was not enough time to do much.

And the Objects were moving at 500 kph. Even if they were pen-sized, reaching out and trying to break them away would only tear his hand off.

So Quenser threw the entire camera bag at the Rush's side without bothering to choose a specific variety of handmade explosive.

Time seemed to start moving again.

The various bottles broke in the bag, the chemicals mixed together, and a number of chemical reactions created a large explosion. By that time, Quenser had left the "valley" between Objects. Not because he was moving quickly but because the Objects were.

His handmade explosives could not destroy an Object's armor, but the Rush's problem was the pen-sized antennae. They were like tiny mites or lice in a dog's fur. A normal bomb was more than enough for them.

And once the curse of the antennae was gone, life was breathed back into the Rush.

The Rush turned around at close range and aimed its main cannon at the Zombie Object that had approached so close. With a deafening explosion, the rapid-fire beam Gatling cannon blew everything away.

That threw Quenser through the air once more.

He had been flying in a parabolic arc, but without anything to support him, he made an unnatural midair hop. Needless to say, the Rush's main cannon's shockwave had hit him.

But Quenser did not have time to cry out from the pain in his back.

(Even that point-blank beam cannon blast – and a Gatling one at that – didn't break through its armor!?)

Layer after layer peeled away, but the damage never got through. Meanwhile, the Zombie Object's main cannon began to move. The large caliber, short barrel cannon had failed to finish off the Princess at ten kilometers, but it would be destructive enough at point-blank range. The Rush's movements showed more panic than the Zombie Object's.

(Oh, no! She'll be destroyed!)

But just as he thought that, an orange beam of frightening destructive power passed right by the airborne student.

At first, he did not know what had happened.

It was only a long while later that he realized it was compressed metal cannon that compressed the shell down to a needle-like point.

At any rate, he made another unnatural bounce, was tossed around, and nearly passed out.

As if peeling away the upper surface of the Zombie Object's spherical main body, a giant hole appeared by also taking out the armor around the single sharp point. A spine chillin sound like a can of food caught in a bear trap reached Quenser's ears after a short delay.

The Zombie Object stopped moving.

It tilted. The air cushion engine must have been malfunctioning because it slowly sank into the sea.

Finally, Quenser was able to stop being a bird.

He was in a tailspin and unable to prepare as he was slammed into the ocean surface.

“Bfwah!?”

The impact felt like a slap to the entire face and it actually snapped his scattering mind into focus. As masochistic talent bloomed inside the idiot, he got his head above the water and searched for something like driftwood or a plastic tank to grab onto. He was far out enough for ships to sail, so there was no way his feet could reach the bottom and he could not swim back to shore under his own power.

Then something else was fired from the distance.

It was a giant antenna buoy that was likely meant for jamming. As he grabbed onto it, Quenser received a radio transmission.

“Legitimacy Kingdom, I quite enjoyed the show. Think of this as my thanks.”

“Cough, cough… What? The Old Fashion..?”

That Object was focused on the battlefield student rather than the Rush or the Zombie Object. Quenser could not figure out what he wanted.

Or perhaps that old warrior did not really want anything out of this.

“So you provide a helping hand even if it is your enemy’s leader in trouble? Not bad. So this is what you lot call ‘chivalry’. I felt just as excited when I first showed this Object off to my old friend. I will fall back as a sign of respect. Legitimacy Kingdom, how much longer will your food and water last?”

“…We won’t last beyond another four days.”

“Then I will ensure the Information Alliance falls back and opens the way before then. Did you hear that, Information Alliance? Prepare yourself.”

At this rate, the Old Fashion and Rush would clash on their own. If

things went well, Oh Ho Ho would fall back, the blockade would be broken, and everyone would be freed from the hell in Second Venice.

Quenser thought about the benefits of that, but he could not hold his tongue.

“Old Fashion, wait!”

“What is it, MVP? Would you like me to fire a case of champagne out there for you?”

“Infection base. Investigate that term. If you still feel like helping us and you’re willing to help people who might be mankind’s enemies, then we’ll be waiting.”

“Hm. Understood.”

This time, the transmission ended.

As Quenser gasped for breath while clinging to the large antenna buoy, another transmission reached him. This one was from the Information Alliance’s Oh Ho Ho.

“How foolish are you? Oh ho ho. If you had kept silent, you could have played the victim and gotten their help, but you went out of your way to turn that ace against you.”

“…I know that.”

Quenser spat his words out toward the enemy leader and then made a declaration.

“But it was necessary.”

“Hmph. …You fool.”

Part 8

It was a long while before a patrol boat arrived to rescue Quenser from the drifting antenna buoy.

It was already evening.

When he arrived back at the maintenance base zone, he was soaking wet and asked his awful friend a question.

“What happened to Catherine?”

“See for yourself. You’ve earned the right.”

Heivia did not take him to a general medical room. It was a sterile room kept at a low temperature for military computers. One corner was separated out by thick translucent tape for a makeshift treatment room.

But how much good did that really do?

Catherine Blueangel was sleeping inside a spindle-shaped capsule. It looked like a fancy coffin to Quenser, so it put him in a really bad mood.

The blonde braid girl seemed to notice her guest.

Unable to remove the oxygen mask covering her mouth, she only opened one eye a little. An amateur like Quenser did not know why she did not open the other eye.

“Big brother…”

“Catherine.”

He had no idea how dangerous it was to do so, but Quenser pressed both hands against the clear shade of the capsule.

“I’m sorry, Catherine. I was ordered to return you to a safe country. I was supposed to help you say goodbye to these dangerous wars. I was supposed to help you gather all the stamps and clear your quota so you could go home!!”

“…”

“What am I supposed to do? How can I reward all the effort you put into this? Just tell me. This happened because you fought to protect not just the 37th but Second Venice as a whole. So tell me! Is there anything I can do for you!?”

He had a feeling Catherine smiled ever so slightly.

“Then…please.”

Her young lips whispered to him.

“Protect everyone, big brother.”

Finally, Quenser left the treatment room sealed off by thick plastic.

Heivia had waited outside the giant vehicle the entire time.

“Our busty commander says she has something to discuss with us.”

“So I guess everyone’s thinking the same thing. If Frolaytia hadn’t suggested it, I would have deserted.”

Not everyone knew the truth. To prevent a panic, very few people knew about the infection base or the deadly mold even within the 37th. For that reason, they were called to Frolaytia’s room full of Island Nation products instead of a large conference room.

Quenser asked a question as soon as he stepped inside.

“Do we know what it is infecting Catherine?”

“Yes. Our doctors, the intelligence division, and the electronic simulation division worked hard even if this wasn’t their specialty. It seems Catherine is quite well liked.”

“How many stamps do you think she had earned in such a short time? And most of them couldn’t be done alone. She isn’t a monster. She’s a human being who can create her own circle of friends to smile with. …So much so that she threw away her own life to rescue this idiot here.”

“Yes. That’s right.” Frolaytia lit her long, narrow kiseru. “I’ll get right to the point: Argeiphontes. Catherine is suffering from the primary component of an infamous riot suppression gas used by the Faith Organization special police. It was developed to be nonlethal, but it was more powerful than intended and the rioters began dropping like flies. And since it took time to prove a link between the accidental deaths and the gas rounds, the number of deaths only grew. Apparently 15,000 people died just in the Faith Organization safe countries around Rome and Athens. It probably took so long to respond because of collusion between the pharmaceutical company and the central ethics board. It apparently began by accepting the reports from computer simulation tests while foregoing actual clinical trials to cut costs.”

“A military chemical…”

“Breathe in even a small amount and it takes out your autonomic nervous system. Do you know what Catherine’s body temperature is right now? If she wasn’t being cooled there, she would have broken 42 degrees within an hour. Stomach pumping and dialysis don’t work. The death rate is 99.8%. That beats out mustard gas for mankind’s worst invention.”

Quenser inhaled and exhaled.

And he touched on the crux of the issue.

“But 0.2% survive, right? I’m not talking about relying on a miracle or some emotional story. Isn’t it possible those people bought god’s love with money?”

“As always, you notice the most interesting things.” Frolaytia grinned. “I just said most of the victims were in the major cities of Rome and Athens, didn’t I? Naturally, plenty of VIPs and wealthy people were involved. And some of those miraculously survived even after being exposed to the Argeiphontes. The mass media called them ‘a beautiful woman loved by god’ or whatever else, but every last one of them used a complex route to donate a large sum to a certain bank account.”

“Who owns the account?”

“That’s an obvious one.”

Frolaytia shrugged and spoke their target’s name.

“Hermes Pharmaceuticals. The developer of the Argeiphontes poison gas and a major investor secretly supporting the Kerukeion special forces.”

External Document – Newspaper Editorial Reporting a Miraculous Survival

While on a vacation to Athens, Miss Elizabeth Schnozzle was caught in the suspected nonlethal gas weapon Argeiphontes used to suppress the riot that developed from the janitors strike, but she has

now shown a miraculous recovery. Is this a matter of her own vitality, of compatibility, or simply god's love for her? Everyone involved is focusing on her.

Miss Schnozzle is currently undergoing mental rehabilitation while also actively participating in various forms of charity. Her miraculous survival means a lot. Las Vegas, Rio de Janeiro, and Second Venice. Gamblers gather at every casino she visits in order to receive some of god's love for her. This increases the chances of many famous players gathering in one place, so it also allows some big names in charity to set up events.

The Faith Organization has yet to make a clear statement on the toxicity of Argeiphontes, but Miss Schnozzle's presence has given hope to a lot of people.

Her fortune will brighten not just her life but the entire world.

Perhaps it is no surprise that god would provide her with so much love.

Day 5

Part 1

One requirement for a military weapon was even more important than destructive power: controllability.

Argeiphontes, the poison gas developed by Hermes Pharmaceuticals was no exception. With a death rate of 99.8%, it was history's worst invention, but it had still begun development as a military product. It was possible they had a stock of an antidote or reductant.

But if so, why had they not saved the tens of thousands of people during the riot suppression accidents? Frolaytia had a possible answer.

"If that research was not their main focus, they would have had enough in stock for a few dozen people at most, so they could not save the vast majority of them. And once the world discovered an antidote existed, the people might decide the company was actively trying to kill people. That's why they refused to use it. The best scenario for them was to hire a parade of lawyers and throw doubt onto the cause of the accidental deaths. …They seem to have failed there, though."

Their busty silver-haired commander was speaking from the top of a tank. The exhaust pipe was attached high in order to cross rivers and a water-resistant firefighting hose had been attached to it. The joint was held on with duct tape and rubber instant glue, so it looked pretty handmade.

Quenser covered the tank's gun with a giant rubber plug and filled the gaps with putty.

"Will this really work?"

"The submarine tank? They used this technique in old wars and the custom designs I had the old lady draw up are perfect. She even tested it on the smaller Full Helm UGV, so it shouldn't be a problem. …There, that should do it."

The busty commander toyed with the duct-taped end of the exhaust pipe and then turned toward Quenser.

“The doctor says Catherine won’t survive two days even if we treat all of her symptoms. I assume you know what you need to do, Quenser.”

“Sneak through the ocean in this to contact a VIP. That piece of shit bought god’s love with a generous donation to Hermes Pharmaceuticals, so they might know how to save Catherine.”

“Well done. With the blockade in place, the Information Alliance of course won’t let us through, so don’t let the Rush notice you.” Frolaytia wiped the sweat from her brow. “Your destination is the Olive Garden 50 km north of here. It’s a modern alternative fuel plant that’s trying to resolve the energy crisis with olive fields instead of petroleum.”

“So they feed you smooth extra virgin olive oil that’s been made more stable and efficient for use in machines? They sound even pickier about their food than us.”

“Well, that might mean we’re a little slimmer than they are. And the Olive Garden is also known as a world-class floating casino. It’s known for buying back the chips for barrels of oil instead of cash.”

“I’m sure it’s just a method of laundering dirty money.”

“The VIP in question is Elizabeth Schnozzle. Her father is the president of an Information Alliance sightseeing company and she was caught in the riots and poison gas after sneaking off to Athens for some fun two years ago. After her miraculous survival, she sent a large sum of money to Hermes Pharmaceuticals. Shockingly, it was enough to buy half an Object.”

Why were they not going after Hermes Pharmaceuticals itself?

They had a simple reason. Hermes Pharmaceuticals had produced the poison gas and was likely to have some of the antidote in stock, but they were an international corporation with more than a million employees and it was impossible to know who had supported the evil deeds. In fact, the majority would be normal, decent people. And Catherine did not have time for them to go searching through them all. To swiftly locate the culprit within Hermes Pharmaceuticals, it was best to track down someone who knew a lot about the situation.

Frolaytia whistled.

“Plus, Elizabeth’s company helped to develop Second Venice, but they also hate it. The island’s popularity exploded, which threw off the corporate group’s power balance, so they’re losing their place in the group. They tried developing different areas along the Mediterranean like crazy to take some of it back, but they keep falling into the red. The Olive Garden is one of those that’s still in the black. Of course, that’s partially because our Resort & Dolce group has been applying pressure from the outside.”

“Do we have any reason to think Elizabeth is there?”

“A red tiltrotor. Elizabeth’s faction originally bought it as a luxury helicopter to take her to and from a nearby desert island she was planning to turn into a private beach, but with Second Venice freely moving around, the couple’s private sex beach was a little too much in the public eye. She was displeased, the plan stalled, and the tiltrotor became her own personal pumpkin carriage. It hasn’t moved since landing at the Olive Garden. We’ve confirmed it by satellite, so there’s no mistaking it.”

“50 km. That’s awfully close to the infection base.”

“She might want to experience it close up. Experience the final moments of the popular destination that’s been weighing on them for so long, that is. And luck would have it Elizabeth and Hermes Pharmaceuticals are enjoying the same casino. They seem to be attending some kind of party together, but more than 500 people from Hermes are scheduled to be in attendance. That’s too many suspects, so getting Elizabeth to talk would be best.”

That said, they did not know when Elizabeth would end her fun and leave on the red tiltrotor. If they did not contact her before she left, they would be unable to save Catherine’s life.

It was a bit forceful, but they would have to cross that sea of death.

And to do so, they had created a makeshift customized submarine tank.

“All I can do is send you off. Once you’re over there, you’re on your own, Quenser.”

“Catherine saved my life. She didn’t hesitate to give me the mask she should have worn. I’m not confident what I would have done if

our situations had been reversed. Compared to that loneliness, infiltrating a den of money-wasters is nothing."

"Is there anything we can do while we wait?"

"Repair the Baby Magnum as quickly as possible. It can only be for show, but make sure she can respond to a high-speed battle. Second Venice is surrounded by the Rush and the Old Fashion and we haven't entirely wiped out the shadow of that Zombie Object. Whatever the case, we can't even sit at the table without an Object."

"I'll do what I can, but I can't make any promises. The spare armor panels are being used as roofs on the makeshift lodgings."

"It doesn't have to be perfect. We just have to be able to put on a performance to show that the Legitimacy Kingdom Object is operational."

"If that bluff works, what do we do after hiding in the smokescreen?"

Quenser answered that question with a short sigh.

And then he made an announcement.

"I don't care how many Objects stand between me and rescuing Catherine. I'll destroy them all myself."

"I see," muttered Frolaytia.

She placed the kiseru in her mouth, scratched her head, and continued.

"Then get to it."

Part 2

It was midnight as they ventured into the dark sea.

"Oh, god. Are we really using a handmade submarine tank? If water gets in through the gaps in the duct tape, it's all over. You're not

supposed to go 120 meters deep in a school summer project!!"

"My school built a lunar probe. It was crushed underfoot after we sent it on a mission to the girls shower room, though. Besides, a solid tank can bear a fair bit of water pressure to begin with. We closed up all the holes in the gun and radiator, so with the long snorkels attached to let oxygen in and exhaust out, we can travel along the bottom of the ocean just fine."

The snorkels he mentioned were the firefighting hoses from before. The ends floated on the water's surface and the floats were camouflaged as planks of driftwood so they would not be noticed.

They had no sense of direction, so they were reliant on a compass as they travelled through the darkness.

But even if the submarine tank could travel freely along the ocean bottom, they could not travel in a straight line. When avoiding those, they had to keep their detour to a minimum. Otherwise, they could lose their sense of direction in the dark sea and end up driving in circles.

"So I guess that bastard Evans survived. Didn't he fall to the ocean bottom in a powered suit?"

"If he didn't survive, than who's that in front of me right now? I don't believe in ghosts."

"I can't believe you two. You forgot about me, didn't you!? You were so moved by what happened with Catherine that you forgot all about me, didn't you!?"

"Shut up. What good is wasting valuable memory space on guys? I'm more surprised about Myonri. Didn't you get shot just three days ago!?"

"Uuh… I really would prefer to be sleeping in a bed in the medical room, but then I heard what happened with Catherine. I'd feel bad sitting around when someone is so much worse off than me."

"You don't seem to understand that people normally die on the battlefield, Myonri. But anyway, congrats on your return to hell. I'm just glad we have a nice feminine scent to counteract the rest of us guys."

"Hmm, well, I guess I'm glad you're as perverted as ever. If

Catherine had awoken a spirit of justice inside you, I figured you were going to die here."

The submarine tank was an extremely effective way of crossing national borders while slipping past radar and satellites, but it was also slow going. They had to make sure the environment did not crush their hearts, so the topic of conversation kept jumping around. The trick was to avoid any silence.

"Oh, yeah. We got some information on that Zombie Object."

"The Old Fashion already sank it, right? Do we really need that?"

"Well, it is a Zombie Object."

"It never hurts to be careful. It's a Faith Organization Second Generation and our codename for it is Lizard Tail. That means this wasn't its first battle."

"Then why didn't we find anything in our database? Is the electronic simulation division getting lazy?"

"We thought it had been destroyed, so it was removed from the list of search candidates. Tee hee."

"The first part makes sense, but that last part is unforgivable. If some bearded old man tried to play it off with a 'tee hee', I am so punching him."

"Well, to be more serious, there's some suspicion that Lizard Tail isn't the name of a specific Object. It might be a disturbance tactic where different Objects are given similar exteriors to look like they're the same. The Faith Organization apparently calls it Dionysus. I'm not entirely sure where the name comes from. I just remember it's the god of a sect with a perverted ritual."

It was a self-harming Object with a death wish.

That Second Generation increased its own value by destroying itself over and over.

"How bizarre can you be?"

"Yeah. Objects are all really weird, but I'd never want to pilot something like that. Even if it's an efficient way of staying alive, it's like how bugs and crabs will let their leg tear off if something grabs

it. I can't bear to watch trivia show footage like that."

But this was being done by the Faith Organisation that loved gods more than food. The design may have been to fulfill an ideal of reincarnation or human sacrifice rather than efficiency.

"…"

"How many more kilometers is it? We've run out of things to talk about, but this silence is going to drive us insane."

"Then let's do the usual. Y'know, how we kill time during the night shift on guard duty."

"Oh, you mean Boobs Concentration?"

They heard someone do a spit take.

It was probably Myonri.

"Wh-wh-wh-what are you talking about!?"

"Do we really have to explain it? If you can name two female soldiers with the same chest size, you get a point. Get one wrong and the other guy gets a turn, so it's pretty simple. The only problem is it leads to some fights if you don't have someone else to act as a judge, so can you take that job, Myonri?"

"There's something wrong with this! Why do so many people know our sizes!?"

"Because we're bored."

"And you can make a pretty good guess by looking."

Part 3

Oh Ho Ho gave an exasperated sigh in the Information Alliance Second Generation Rush's cockpit.

She was rearranging the songs she would use for her next public performance, and…

“Really, do you have to be so obvious about it?”

An Object was generally meant to be the ruler on land or sea, so anything else was branching off of that. They dealt with the air by shooting down the enemy aircraft with their anti-air lasers, so the Object itself did not actually fly. Similarly, underground and underwater were not the 200,000 ton mass’s main field.

However, that did not mean there was nothing they could do.

Objects were the weapons that had ended the nuclear age. And those old weapons had included many bizarre varieties: nuclear mines set on the sea bottom, nuclear torpedoes that traveled through the ocean, and ship-to-surface nuclear missiles that slowly approached the coast in the ocean but traveled just off the surface at more than Mach 5 after rising from the sea.

Objects of course had weapons to deal with those, just like they had anti-air lasers.

An inability to dive underwater was not the same as an inability to rule the sea.

(Well, I do owe him one after saving me before.)

Oh Ho Ho rhythmically tapped her slender finger on the control panel in time with her own music as she paused in hesitation.

“Oh ho ho. And what better way to thank him than to go all out no matter the situation?”

She ultimately decided to attack.

That may have been due to her Idol Elite side also being military-minded.

Several metal dice were thrown into the dark ocean from the bottom of the Rush.

They looked tiny compared to the Object, but each one was the size of an air cargo container. And they were loaded with explosives. The dice could detect the artificial sounds in the ocean that did not exist in the natural world and they could compare them to the sound patterns of the propellers registered to their own army. Any that did not match would be deemed an enemy and the deadly fish eggs would be fired at the target.

The barrage density and individual accuracy was great enough to perfectly intercept up to twenty simultaneous nuclear torpedoes that travelled through the ocean at Mach speeds using supercavitation.

Thus, a submarine tank digging through the sand on the ocean bottom was hardly a challenge.

(Unlike land battles, the slightest damage is enough to take you out in the sea or in the air, so I don't even need my plasma or railguns.)

"Oh ho ho. Target X confirmed destroyed. I detected the bubble after the water pressure crushed it and the air escaped."

Part 4

After their last ray of hope in submarine tank form was destroyed, Quenser and the others groaned inside sweaty diving suits.

"Couldn't Oh Ho Ho show at least a little bit of *dere*!?"

"An idol's got to seem out of reach. Once they start to seem like an individual, they can't sell anymore."

They had never been aboard the submarine tank. No matter how silently it moved, they had decided it was impossible to slip past the Second Generation.

So where were they?

On something camouflaged as driftwood.

"Th-this snorkel will ride the waves to the Olive Garden even though the submarine tank was destroyed, right?"

"If the map had the currents right. If not, we'll just have to pray. We're in the middle of the Mediterranean, so we'll have to pray we get washed up on a shore controlled by the Legitimacy Kingdom. It'd be a real tragedy if we ended up in the Faith Organization."

A long snorkel much like an antenna buoy had extended to the ocean surface to circulate oxygen and exhaust to and from the

submarine tank. That was why their busty silver-haired commander had attached a fire hose with duct tape.

Quenser and the other three had assumed the submarine tank itself would be destroyed, so they were clinging to the air intake floating on the surface. They had let the engine pull them along as far as possible and, now that the submarine tank was gone, they would ride the current.

This was still a deadly sea. If the Rush noticed the trick, they would be killed instantly. The four idiots were still restricted to a slow pace.

“Hey, isn’t the smallest nuclear weapon the size of a rugby ball? It fits in a suitcase, right? Couldn’t someone use this method to slip a nuke past an Object’s defenses?”

“Use a heavy element like californium and you can make a nuclear weapon the size of your thumb. The nuclear age is supposed to be over, so let’s just hope mankind doesn’t get any cleverer.”

“Ugh…”

“What is it, Evans? I know you’re nervous, but try not to vomit. There’s nowhere for it to go in these diving suits. You don’t want to drown in your own vomit, do you?”

“It’s not that… Sorry, I’m not sure why, but that Object is scaring me so bad it’s giving me a bit of a boner.”

“Welcome to the club, Evans. Now you’re a true member of the 37th!”

“Wait, are you including me in that!?” protested Myonri, but the idiots did not care.

After more than three hours, they finally left the Rush’s territory.

“Is that the party that doesn’t seem to care there’s a war going on?” asked Heivia as he clung to the driftwood.

It was past four in the morning. The late night was shifting to early morning, so the black was changing to navy blue. But one section of the sea contained a flood of light that was never extinguished. It was not a natural land. A giant square area of reclaimed land was located alongside the coast. The only connection to the mainland

they could see was a single large illuminated bridge.

“They built a floating city for no reason and without thinking about the economic efficiency or environmental effects? Sounds like the location of a school in an Island Nation light novel.”

“There are better analogies, you know? Like a bay airport.”

“Anyway, we’ll be there in less than twenty minutes. Men, prepare yourselves.”

The end of the reclaimed land had been made into an artificial beach, but it did not seem to be very popular at night. The casino was the real draw at this time.

After safely reaching land, Quenser and the others stripped off their diving suits and removed the items packed in plastic and attached to the bottom of the driftwood. They had everything they needed: assault rifles, submachineguns, handguns, knives, hand grenades, grenade launchers, fully-auto shotguns, light machineguns, anti-materiel rifles, and even plastic explosives and shoulder-fired missiles.

“Everyone gave us way too much stuff! We can’t carry all this!!”

“Heh. This just shows how much everyone loves Catherine.”

Quenser took some explosives and Heivia took an assault rifle with a grenade launcher attached. Myonri took a fully-auto shotgun with a box magazine and Evans took a semi-auto anti-material rifle. The four idiots complained, but they all grabbed the weapon they wanted.

“Oh, it’d be a pain if someone picked up the extra weapons, so should we bury them in the sand?”

“This place is amazing. They’ve got a luxury hotel and an industrial complex’s huge-ass cylindrical tank right next to each other.”

“Please help me out here. U-um, where is the actual olive field? Isn’t this supposed to be a facility for making alternative fuel?”

“It’s probably one of those plant factories that are all the rage these days. The olives will be growing with the protection of air conditioning and water purifiers inside a building or dome. They might have more comfortable beds than we do.”

Their first step was finding Elizabeth Schnozzle who had miraculously survived and getting her to tell them who in Hermes Pharmaceuticals gave her the antidote. The next step was grabbing that person and getting the product or a chemical formula out of them. Fortunately, Hermes Pharmaceuticals was also planning to throw a large party at the Olive Garden.

If they failed at any point, Catherine would not survive.

Quenser took a deep breath while carrying a backpack full of bombs.

“Let’s get started. Where’s Elizabeth’s castle?”

“Um, I think it’s one of the monster-sized casinos. This one is called Olympus. The Olive Garden has a ton of casinos, but based on the flow of money, that’s the only one with a lack of an upper limit on bets. She’ll be making a ton of money at once there instead of betting little bits at a time elsewhere.”

“So she’s one of the honored guests that the normal people don’t even get to know about, huh? That’s perfect. It gives one less reason to hold back. I was asked to protect everyone and that includes Catherine.”

“She’s apparently drawn in a lot of customers by acting like a goddess of fortune ever since her miraculous survival. Let’s get her to share some of that love of god she bought. Catherine could really use it.”

The Olive Garden itself was a five kilometer square of reclaimed land. Somewhere in the flood of lights was the Olympus casino.

Quenser and the others made their way straight there.

They got some weird looks from bored limousine drivers waiting for the few customers who remained in the casinos at this hour and from the call girls who had been kicked out of the fancy hotel lobbies.

It was a small area full of lots of money.

That meant security would be strict and there would be more cameras and sensors covering the entire area. They were not tuxedo-wearing spies, so they could not remain hidden forever. But that had never been part of their plan.

“Hey, Quenser. Do you know what the Olive Garden is classified as?”

“It’s officially a Faith Organization military base. I’m sure the fuel reserves they use to buy back the chips are a way to avoid taxes, though.”

“But that makes it a battlefield country, right?”

“Yeah, and so there’s no problem if some soldiers get into a firefight. It won’t even make the news.”

They heard the disconcerting sound of military tires tearing at the ground. A boxy truck-sized mass ignored the traffic light to secure a line of fire. It looked like the fusion of a firefighter’s hook-and-ladder truck and an armored truck, but it was not painted red and it had no front windshield. It had arrived within five minutes of Quenser’s group reaching land, so their reaction speed was quite good.

Heivia asked a question while hiding behind some nearby cover.

“What is that?”

“Either a military firetruck for base security or a modified killer water truck.”

“Um, doesn’t water have the opposite effect with an oil fire?”

“Don’t cry before it’s even started, Myonri. It probably uses a chemical based on incombustible oil. This is an alternative fuel base, remember? And a sticky liquid will be released with more force than normal water. The high-pressure chemical used for oil fires can push a parked car to the side or break your back even through a bulletproof vest.”

“It’s probably a necessity for security when they can’t afford to trigger any explosions. Ugh…”

But the resort security may have been a little too well-mannered.

The four Legitimacy Kingdom idiots no longer cared much who their opponent was. They just wanted to know who they needed to shoot at.

Quenser took a baseball-sized plastic explosive, stuck a pen-shaped

electric fuse into it, and did not hesitate to chuck it toward the killer water truck.

“Your friend Quenser is a little different. Today, you can call me your angry big brother, baby.”

He hit a button on his radio and a flower of explosive flames blossomed.

Part 5

With that first explosion, the battle began.

Below the navy blue sky, the killer water truck hopped straight up and burst into flames. The blast-resistant doors opened and soldiers ran out while partially on fire only for rifle bullets to hit them. Heivia whistled as he fired.

“This is only the opening skirmish and it isn’t over until we reach the casino. Don’t use up all your ammo before we go for the jackpot!!”

“You’re shooting more than anyone, Heivia!”

“It’s all meaningless if we kick the bucket before getting there!!”

“Which of those instructions are we supposed to follow!?”

As he complained, Quenser kneaded some Hand Axe into a baseball-sized sphere and attached a pen-shaped electric fuse to the top. He threw it toward the Faith Organization soldiers who were persistently targeting them from behind cover.

“Oh, did that stick to him?”

The enemy panicked when he saw the bomb stuck to his helmet, but Quenser did not let up. He used his radio to blow up the fleeing soldier and everything else behind cover.

Heivia mercilessly pulled the trigger on the enemy soldiers that just barely managed to roll away from the blast.

“Wow, these guards sure are straitlaced. They actually fight properly and even die when they’re supposed to.”

“Their pay must be better than ours.”

While Heivia swapped out his magazine, Evans used his anti-materiel rifle to destroy the very wall the enemy was hiding behind.

Quenser and the others advanced further while harmless bikini girls and bunny girls ran around in a panic.

They had reached the neon-flooded main strip of casinos. It was almost dawn, but the brightly lit signs were an eyesore.

“The Faith Organization isn’t taking this as seriously as I would have thought. I mean, I’m carrying a heavy missile on my back.”

“They probably don’t want to damage the roads and bridges with tank treads. And longer range heavy machineguns or autocannons raise the odds of accidentally hitting some VIP or another.”

“D-does that mean they can’t bring out some dirty depleted uranium rounds in this luxury resort for the wealthy? The rounds that pierce their target could also break through a giant water tank or something.”

At precisely that moment, the restaurant to the side had a wall blown apart and a giant mass moved out onto the main strip. This was not the same as the killer water truck from before. It felt like looking up at a giant excavation dump truck that rivaled a three-story building.

And this was no construction vehicle. It was a 12-wheel armored truck with a swiftly rotating roller tilted on its side on the front. It swung around lots of chains and weights like a car wash’s brush, so simply coming into contact with it would level a reinforced concrete building. They did not even want to imagine what would happen to human flesh.

“That’s a flail roller!! They really developed that landmine digger in a stupid direction!!”

“I guess they aren’t going to make this easy after all. They probably use it to destroy the buildings without any chance of starting an oil fire. Evans, your anti-materiel rifle won’t work on that! It’s a waste of ammo!!”

Quenser shouted at his comrade who was continuing to fire nonstandard bullets straight at the vehicle.

That equipment was originally meant to allow a mine clearance vehicle to dig up the ground as it moved. Simply put, it cleared the mines by stepping on them. Unlike a tractor's metal blades, the chains and weights would not bend or break from the impact of the exploding mines. Now that its size had been increased and it had been further modified, no normal firepower stood a chance against it.

And that giant armored truck with flails attached was clearly headed their way. Any car they hid behind would only be turned to scrap along with them.

Quenser and the others quickly ran inside a nearby shop. There was a reception counter up front, a row of long narrow glass doors was located behind that, and the rest was divided into booths about the same as phone booths.

When Heivia and the others aimed their guns forward, the young man behind the counter tearfully raised his hands instead of reaching for the button below the counter.

"I-I have no money! There's no safe! I'm not pilfering any of the sales and there's no secret account book!"

"I don't care, you liar. Where's the emergency exit! Point the way and we'll leave. Hurry it up! Hurry!!"

The noble roared with a rifle in hand, but the problem was the rest of the building, not the counter.

"Dammit, this is a shooting range! They let the drunks have rifles!? Are they crazy!?"

"Don't think about taking control here. They all have their backs turned and they have ear protection on. They're so focused on their own gunfire that they won't notice us."

Evans urged them to be careful as he held up his heavy-looking anti-materiel rifle. Instead of paper targets moving along metal rails, the shooting range had a giant screen covering the wall like in a movie theater.

"The Olympus Casino's Goddess Cup Poker Tournament is

approaching its climax. The star tonight is Wydine Uptown of a Capitalist Corporations battlefield cleanup service. The way that money-mad maid lines her cards up so neatly has been the highlight of the show. But let's not forget the surprise mystery contestant who has only identified himself as The Evil God of a Thousand Faces. That name is a mystery, but his skill is real. Europe's best eight have already had their chips taken and dropped out. The predicted odds have been in total flux for a while now."

It seemed to be a game where they used toy guns that synchronized blanks with an infrared laser rifle so they could try to shoot the celebrities on the live footage between the eyes. It was a way for the losers to blow off some steam. The four idiots rushed down the corridor running behind the 100 meter bowling alley-like booths.

"I can't fault these people for their taste in hobbies, but why isn't Elizabeth on the screen? Isn't Olympus the casino she's at?"

"She's the goddess of fortune, remember? She can't take part in a game that might let people see her lose big."

They discussed the situation while following the guiding lights to the back exit.

"Anyway, we need to deal with that flail roller out front. Its invincible armor is only on the front. If we circle behind it and shoot it in the side or right up the asshole, we should be able break through just fine."

That was when several gunshots sounded in the back corridor. And these did not sound like the toy blanks. Myonri and Evans hid behind a drink vending machine and Heivia tackled carefree Quenser over. The bodyguards hired by individuals seemed to have better weapons than the actual soldiers.

Confused by the gunfire from an unexpected direction, Evans shouted to the others.

"What are those giant parasols!? Screen camouflage!?"

"Yeah, it's still too expensive to wear like a raincoat, but I guess the market is picking up for the ones you hold up like a flat shield."

"Damn those hobbyists. Were they killing time on a bench out here while their carefree master is firing in there!?"

Heivia fired a warning shot just outside of the group of parasols that hid the bodyguards by overwriting the background in real time like a TV.

“We’re only here for Elizabeth Schnozzle! If you don’t want to get your client involved in this, then get lost!! We’re really pissed since a 12-year-old Elite collapsed after deciding she wanted something new in life. A future beauty’s life is wearing away with every second that passes. Slow us down and you’ll get a bullet right up your dirty asshole. But if you’re the kind of pervert that thinks a pointless firefight is worth a 5.56mm suppository, then come and get it!!” After the suggestion from the potatoes behind the vending machines, the men in black clothes and sunglasses closed the parasols. They were apparently normal. They slowly moved toward the booths occupied by men with ample builds (i.e. they were fat) and hit the button to sound the alarm. Heivia raised his middle finger and gave a suggestion to those young men with a future.

“We’ll say we had to retreat due to your courageous mercenary work. You can report whatever you want, but make sure the official write up mentions how stunningly handsome I am.”

The lead bodyguard gave him a look that demanded they leave and pointed toward the emergency exit light with his chin.

“It’s cruel how understanding adults can be.”

“It’s better than running across someone with a weird sense of justice.”

“I know what you mean. Shooting an ally of justice is the hardest thing to bear.”

“You too, Evans!?” complained Myonri. “Do we not have a single justice-minded hero among us!?”

They left the stress-relief shooting range through the back entrance, snuck back toward the main strip, and observed the giant flail vehicle as it crawled around. The flails were only on the front and the side armor looked perfectly normal.

“Evans.”

That word was all it took. The semiauto anti-materiel rifle punched fist-sized holes in the side at even intervals from front to back, destroying the crew compartment, the engine room, and the fuel

tank. The large explosion also blew away the infantry accompanying it.

They continued walking along out front and finally got near the Olympus casino.

But then they heard a great din like the flapping of drying sheets in the wind but amplified by several dozen times. The Four Heavenly Idiots looked around.

“Wh-where is that coming from? It sounds like an engine warming up!”

“It doesn’t matter where. It’s like a helicopter but different. That red tiltrotor is preparing to take off! That’s Elizabeth’s!!”

“Then we can’t let it take off. It doesn’t matter who, let’s take a soldier hostage.”

Gunfire rang out and an enemy soldier fell out from behind an electronic sign after being shot in the leg. The Faith Organization soldiers tried to gather their ally, but Myonri chased them off with some rapid-fire shots of her shotgun.

Quenser dashed over and kicked the soldier in the face as he tried to draw a handgun with his bloody hand. Anyone could be a hero when they had the upper hand. He stepped on the enemy’s right hand and asked a question.

“I hear this place buys back the casino chips with the alternative fuel from the olive oil. Which tanks are Elizabeth’s?”

“…”

“You don’t have to answer me if you don’t want. Then we just have to blow them all up. This angry big brother can be frightening when he gets serious.”

“N-numbers 8 through 19… She is loved by god. She relied on her good fortune to gather all that oil from the other investors…”

“I didn’t need to know that much. Here’s your reward.”

He pulled some disinfectant and bandages from his survival kit, threw them at the soldier’s feet, and then pulled a plastic explosive from his backpack.

“What are you going to do with the bomb? I doubt you can throw it high enough to reach the pumpkin carriage after it takes off.”

“The real problem is we can’t kill her. There’s a ton we have to ask Elizabeth, remember?”

As Quenser moved on ahead, the other idiots discussed their plans.

And the first idiot gave his answer.

“Hey, Heivia. As a noble, you know a thing or two about charter planes, right? What are the main reasons for canceling the takeoff of a plane?”

“Hm?”

“Wind and fog.”

Part 6

The beautiful woman with plentiful bodylines wore a blood-red dress. Her taste in clothing and makeup had yet to leave the category of “girly”. That created an imbalance with her body, but no one was willing to tell her that. And unlike the emperor and his new clothes, she was at least pleasant to look at. Some people might even welcome it.

That very beautiful queen was incredibly angry. Her face was as red as her dress and she yelled at the tiltrotor pilot with the short temper of a young girl still intact.

“What do you mean we can’t take off!?”

“W-we can’t fly with the poor visibility! I’m sorry!! The oil fire has filled the sky with black smoke!!”

“…!!”

The navy blue sky was burned orange as it reflected the fires on the surface. And unhealthy-looking black smoke boldly ruined that billion dollar view.

“Faith Organization aviation law bans taking off in fog with opacity of greater than 40% or in equivalently poor visibility. The control tower won’t give me permission for takeoff and the oil fire won’t be extinguished for a day or two. There’s no point in waiting here any longer!”

“Wh-why are you acting like this is so dangerous? There’s nothing up there to run into.”

“First of all, the Olive Garden has a great number of high-rise buildings to effectively use the limited space. Second, the sky above the Olive Garden is a high traffic airspace, so some kind of aircraft passes by at a rate of once every two minutes. Not to mention the possibility of seagulls or an unregistered photography drone that some tourists brought without permission. And a lot of them would probably want to get a video of this oil fire. So…”

“Oh, honestly!!”

Elizabeth slammed her palm against the partition and climbed out of the tiltrotor. She was accompanied by bodyguards that looked equipped for urban warfare (perhaps because their client wanted what she had seen in movies) as she descended from the heliport and held her long brown hair in place.

“That carefree pilot is so fired!! We’ll just have to use a land route. Form an escort group with those bulletproof cars in the underground parking garage and we’ll take the bridge to the-…”

She trailed off when she heard another explosion in the distance. It was hard to see through the curtain of black smoke, but some flashing lights were plainly visible in one direction.

They were coming from the one bridge to the mainland.

It had likely been a missile attack. And anyone with any sense would assume a connection.

“Kh. Get me a cruiser! Or a submarine if you have to!! The marina has plenty that you can purchase with a single tap on the electronic catalog!!”

“Miss Elizabeth.”

One of her special unit whispered to her.

She glared at him, thinking of firing him as well, but he resolutely gave his report.

“That will not work either. …They are already here.”

A moment later, an explosion shook the entire casino.

Part 7

A killer water truck had been waiting at the roundabout in front of the Olympus hotel, but they threw some balled-up Hand Axe to blow it up. When they threw a few of the scorched helmets in through the building’s broken glass door, the employees and guests in the lobby grew quite obedient. The doormen’s upper bodies were swollen with the commercial bulletproof vests worn below their uniforms, but even they let go of their shotguns with attached metal detectors and put their hands up. They seemed to understand that the anger of these cowboys went beyond the frustration of losing big at the casino.

Once inside, Quenser was stunned.

The front gate was the only proper building. Beyond that, the different forms of adult recreation were separated out like at a zoo or amusement park. There was an outdoor leisure pool lit up from below the water. Slot machines and bar counters were lined up on the pool side and the roulette and card tables floated in the pool like small islands.

“Why do rich people want to get in a pool after going to a seaside resort?”

“They’re here for the girls in swimsuits, not the sea. …Hey, you!! Don’t be using this confusion to put some old lady’s sweaty panty hose over your head, you loser! We’re not letting anyone blame some regular old casino robbery on us. If you don’t want to get shot for your greed, then get lost!!”

“Humans really are bold creatures.”

The live footage they had seen in the shooting range seemed to have been taking place on a special gazebo stage floating in the

center of the pool, but it had already been abandoned. The card game experts seemed to have sniffed out the trouble before it arrived.

Quenser politely stuck some Legitimacy Kingdom money in the cleavage of a bunny girl cowering nearby and asked a gentlemanly question.

“Excuse me, miss. Where is the heliport!?”

They all ran in the direction indicated by her pointer finger. It was a short distance from the pool casino and the view was blocked by a row of palm trees and hibiscus trees.

“Come to think of it, I don’t hear the rotors anymore.”

“They’re not stupid.”

As they burst through the wall of giant vegetation, they found the way blocked by a tall chain-link fence. A metal sign warned them of a high-voltage current.

“So they grew the trees to hide this from the guests. How dangerous.”

They followed the fence and found a chain-link door. It would normally be shut with an electronic lock, but someone had apparently been in a hurry. It sat slightly open.

They continued on in and the heliport came into view beyond the tropical trees. The red tiltrotor sat there with its engine stopped. It was less than thirty meters away.

There was someone there.

The beautiful young woman wore a red dress with a design too youthful and girly for her. Her face matched the newspaper clipping in Frolaytia’s report.

“Elizabeth…!!”

“Wait, Quenser! Dammit!!”

Quenser started forward, but Heivia grabbed his arm and quickly dove behind a nearby palm tree. Gunfire immediately followed. The surrounding bodyguards had reacted.

“She’s got fifteen bodyguards equipped with bulletproof plates. A grenade would work if we could kill Elizabeth, but we can’t. Evans, take them out one at a time with your anti-materiel rifle!”

“Take our time with that and more reinforcements will arrive. Heivia, let’s take them all out at once. Start shooting on my signal.”

“What, are you going to use that to mold a tits-shaped bomb, stick a fuse in the cleavage, and throw it? You’ll blow Elizabeth to pieces along with them!!”

“Normally, yes. But what do you think happens if we start shooting but readily fall back when they shoot back!?”

They all looked confused, so Professor Quenser continued his special lecture.

“This is an away game for us. And we’re outnumbered. So if we start falling back, they’ll get carried away pretty easily! They’ll eagerly begin the hunt. And since they can’t use the tiltrotor, they have to pass through this door to escape some other way. They’ll come right for us, so hiding a bomb wouldn’t be hard. If we detonate it up below their feet once they approach, we can blow them all away!!”

That was exactly what happened.

Thirty seconds later, the careless group was blown away along with the high-voltage wires and chain link fence. They must have been issued some decent jackets because the bodyguards were still alive as they groaned among the scraps of metal and broken trees.

And after waiting a short distance away, Quenser’s group returned to the heliport.

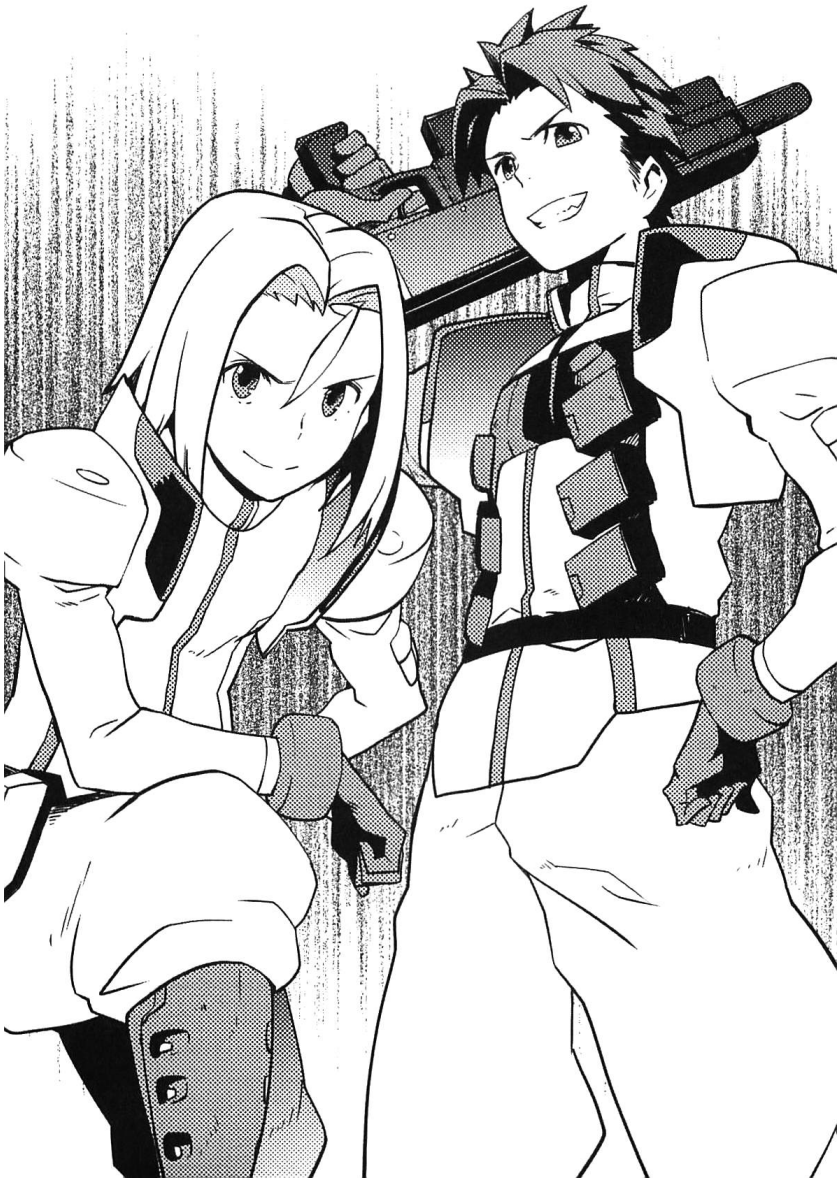
Heivia aimed at the collapsed worms and gave a shout.

“If you think you can turn this around now, then just try it! But only if you think you can win when you don’t even know how far away your gun ended up!!”

“H-hey. Remember that screen camouflage? There aren’t more hiding behind those weird parasols, are there? I’m kind of scared.”

“Look at the color of the sky, Evans. The navy blue sky is a mess of reflected orange and black smoke. The real-time footage can’t keep

up with that in the background. If the specs are the same as the one a perverted professor at my safe country school was messing around with, it would definitely stand out right now."



But the beautiful brown-haired woman, whose bright red dress she was a little too old for, had grown bright red in the face too. She pointed one at a time at the bodyguards who were lying around like they were hungover after letting loose at a training camp.

“You! And you and you and you!! You’re all fired!!”

“Don’t worry. Your assets are burning away right now, so you wouldn’t be able to pay them either way. Putting it in words is a waste of time.”

When they heard that, the men all sighed. They held their heads and slowly stood up, but it was obvious they had no intention of fighting. This may have been the atmosphere seen in the instant that someone gave up on – or was given up on by – someone else. In that super awkward atmosphere, the muscular men left the scene as if their job was over.

“Now then, miss.”

“Eek!”

“Tell us what we want to know and we won’t hurt you. We’re all a bunch of perverts with a severe lack of morals, so I’d recommend not angering us. Don’t underestimate people stupid enough to sneak past an Object to go fight a war for their cute little sister. Do you understand the rules now? Then how about you tell us.”

“T-t-tell you what…?”

“How to buy god’s love.”

Part 8

“Y’know what?”

Heivia sounded entirely carefree.

His pointless chatter rang loudly through a large empty space.

“The world is a weird place. It’s been ten hours since then. Lunchtime is about over and the sun is high in the sky. There was a commotion right after the attack, but why is Hermes Pharmaceuticals still holding a party according to their peaceful schedule only about half a day afterwards?”

“This isn’t a late-night party in some fancy bar. It’s a daytime

ceremony. They must have reserved a resort hotel for the participants and they rented out an event hall too. These formal things aren't allowed to fail. Even if an asteroid hit, they need to be able to show the signature that says it was all completed without delay. I thought a noble like you would know more about this kind of thing."

"B-but I'm amazed they didn't find us. If they had used all their personnel to search the limited reclaimed land or gone over everything with their rollers, we wouldn't have had anywhere to run."

"There's a good and bad side to everything. The oil fire won't go out for two or three days and all of its flames and smoke prevent them from using satellite photography or thermo. As long as we aren't taken out by the heat and smoke ourselves, doesn't this seem like the best urban hideout?"

Quenser continued his "work" as they chatted.

Heivia helped from the side and seemed to still have plenty of questions.

"Hey. We're after the people who developed that poison gas in Hermes Pharmaceuticals, right? We can't get the antidote otherwise. They created a debt in the billions of euros, so why do they still hold an important position? Even ten thousand euros would be a hopeless debt for us. The units of money are confusing me."

"That's just how crucial a pillar they are for the country. You could say they're partially nationally owned."

They were pasting clay-style plastic explosives to a luxurious wall. The long, skinny bombs were attached in a two meter box as if to create a door. They then attached pen-shaped electric fuses and synchronized the detonation timing.

Even without a directional microphone, they could hear the voice on the other side of the door.

"Doesn't it scare you how well this is going?"

"You've caught the Frolaytia disease. You should be celebrating."

All four of them moved away from the wall.

They heard the following announcement from beyond the wall:

“Now we will hear from a key figure who will bring an even greater future to Hermes! Please welcome Veneto Dandelion, a pioneer in the field of chemical security, including tear spray and oil slicks!!”

They blew it to pieces.

At that moment, a perfect door shape was blown into the back wall of the grand party stage being viewed by 500 people. A well-built elderly man was spectacularly thrown through the air and into the speech lectern. His head was shaken so hard his toupee flew off and four idiots in the uniforms of an enemy nation poured out of the makeshift entrance.

“Hey, is he okay? The old man’s legs are broken.”

“He’s made enough dirty money for a lifetime of fun, so even if he spends the rest of his life in a hospital bed, it averages out to a pretty good life. And this is perfect. Hey, say it in front of everyone from Hermes. Say you covered up the poison gas accidents, torpedoed the brand name everyone else worked so hard for, and are actively killing a cute 12-year-old all for your insane greed.”

There was some obvious violence going on, but not one of the 500 people moved. And not just out of fear of the guns and soldiers from an enemy nation.

They would never say so, but they mostly knew the truth.

So if some enemy soldiers would take care of it, they were not about to complain.

That was the gist of the atmosphere.

“Where’s the antidote?”

“…”

When Quenser slowly asked, Veneto Dandelion slowly reached into his fancy suit’s pocket. He pulled out a few syringes in a special case.

Quenser pulled one out, stabbed it into the man’s neck, and mercilessly pressed his thumb down on the cylinder. The mystery drug quickly slipped into the man’s veins.

When the man suddenly began struggling violently, the angry big brother grabbed his arms and shouted into his ear.

“I asked for the antidote! I don’t know what you tried to give me as a bluff, but it isn’t the real thing if you have to struggle that much. So you should probably get yourself treated too!! This is for both of us now!!”

Part 9

And so…

“Who would think this thin card could turn into the antidote?”

After retrieving their spare weapons buried in the beach, Heivia held the laminated card up to the moon in the night sky.

Quenser shook a glass device.

“Mixing a drug is a lot like making a cocktail. If you know the ingredients and the ratios, you just need to know how and in what order to mix them together. And it’s safer to keep that on a card in your wallet than to leave it out on the cloud. And it won’t raise any questions when a police officer searches your possessions because it doesn’t have any special equipment. They won’t know if it has a military encrypted IC chip inside.”

Just like before, he had combined things like a vacuum coffee maker and a bowl full of ice to build his own chemistry set that looked like a glass roller coaster. He used that to separate and recombine ingredients from the cold medicine and pain medicine he had acquired at a drug store.

Instead of rushing back to Second Venice with the card, they were hiding out in the dangerous reclaimed land to do the work in advance. They had a simple reason for that.

“It’s crazy that we can’t just send an email now that we have it right here. Well, I do get that we can’t let the Rush and its largescale communications equipment notice us.”

“And if that Veneto bastard was lying a second or third time, we

need to turn right back around, shove some Hand Axe in his mouth and up his ass, and turn him into a human firework."

"You're one scary big brother."

"It is a citizen's duty to risk his life for his cute little sister."

"Well, you're definitely an only child. There's no way I'm throwing my life away for a 'little sister'!!"

The finished mixing up the antidote as they argued.

It was a translucent and somewhat yellowish liquid.

"But how do we test it?"

"I brought this with me. It's the impurities built up in the filter to the gas mask Catherine gave me. In other words, it's the primary component of Argeiphontes."

"Are you insane!?"

"Inject me with the antidote. If it doesn't work, go kill that Veneto bastard for me. Adios."

Quenser dropped the white powder on the back of his hand and snorted it. It may have looked like a different sort of scene, but then he started wobbling and fell to the side.

"Are you kidding me, you pervert!? Did having little Catherine by your side bring out a new fetish inside you!?"

"Let's be nice and at least call it an interest! Here's the syringe!!"

"Heivia, wrap a belt or something around Quenser's upper arm. I think we need to make sure the blood vessel is bulging out!"

"Dammit, do we really have to make this look even more like that kind of scene!?"

Quenser had collapsed with fever, so they borrowed his right arm, rolled up his uniform's sleeve, sterilized the area with some alcohol, and passed the needle through his skin. Surprisingly, Heivia looked away when the needle pricked him. He did not hesitate to slit an enemy soldier's throat from behind, but he apparently had trouble with this.

“Well? What happened? Did it work?”

“Please wait a moment. This isn’t instant glue, so it isn’t going to take effect so soon.”

“…Is it just me or is his breathing growing shallow?”

“Not good!! Prepare for a heart massage!!”

Meanwhile, Quenser’s eyes opened a little as he lay on the ground. Light entered them. The antidote seemed to have worked.

And as he prepared to tell the others that as they peered down at him.

“Okay, start! 1, 2, 3, 4, 5!!”

“Bweh!? Gbah!! Aghah!!”

(I’m gonna die! I’m gonna die!? Wait, why are they doing chest compre-…gweh!?)

“Ah, Quenser’s reacting!”

“Let’s keep him here on this filthy planet. It’s too soon for this idiot to visit the luxury resort in the sky!!”

“Bh…ah…”

As Heivia relentlessly continued the chest compressions, Quenser grabbed the boy’s neck and sprang up like some kind of trap.

“Are you trying to kill me!?”

“Is that anything to say to the guy who saved your life!? H-hey, stop! Don’t crush those soap-like rations below your dirty boots and throw them at me!”

Myonri and Evans could only sigh as the two idiots got into a fight. There had been some trouble along the way, but the antidote had proved effective.

Thus…

“I’m the proof. We don’t need to fear Argeiphontes anymore. Let’s get back to Second Venice and wake up Sleeping Beauty.”

“Cough, ugh. That’s fine. Catherine’s the only one infected, so the Rush will lose its justification for the blockade if we save her.”

“But how do we get back? Borrowing a cruiser is easy enough, but the Information Alliance’s Rush is still watching over everything.”

“Y-yeah. And Quenser, we can’t float past as driftwood this time. The direction of the current is fixed. Since we used it to get here, we’ll be fighting the current this time.”

Quenser shrugged at Myonri and Evans’s comments.

“We can just take a cruiser back.”

“What?”

“We don’t need to hide. The Rush’s job is to keep us in. She can’t restrict us if we’re going back in. Since we already left, she’ll be curious where we were out having some fun, but forcing us back out wouldn’t make sense since we might be infected.”

“…”

“…”

The more normal two among the idiots exchanged a bitter glance.

And the extraordinary idiot had more to say.

“Now, let’s make a triumphant return right past the Information Alliance who won’t have a clue what’s going on.”

External Document – Report on Faith Organization Object Development

As wartime PR, all four world powers have a tendency to deify their Objects and Pilot Elites. The Legitimacy Kingdom views them as knights and the Information Alliance as idols. But that trend is most evident in the Faith Organization which focuses heavily on religious belief.

They tend to focus more on the Pilot Elite than the mechanical

Object and they view the Object as a tool the Elite uses to increase their charisma. You could say the Faith Organization views the Object as a temple and the Elite as the priest or shrine maiden that controls the temple. Through that, the people under their protection see a god.

For that reason, the Faith Organization will occasionally adopt designs far removed from the ideals of efficiency and logic. For them, the concept of the Object as an unsinkable ship with all-powerful guns is nothing more than one aspect of the device to increase their charisma. To embody the god whose name it borrows and the ideal desired by the people, they will even throw out any benefits that would harm that balance of theirs.

These bizarre designs are often far removed from general effectiveness and will introduce flaws and fragility.

But it does not end there, as should be obvious from the Faith Organization's continued presence as one of the four world powers. Standard assumptions do not apply to these bizarre designs. It may be similar to how the unexpected actions of a complete amateur are more likely to kill an expert than the ineffectual efforts of poorly-trained soldiers, but if they can control and reproduce those lucky hits and beginner's luck, then that is a real threat indeed.

Or perhaps the fact that the fate of their entire army relies on those lucky hits is a sign that the Faith Organization truly is loved by god.

Day 6

Part 1

“Hey, if we’re gonna do this, let’s borrow a really nice one. Look, there’s a cruiser designed by an F1 maker.”

They felt like pirates.

Quenser and the others set out into the dark sea in *one of* the private possessions of Veneto Dandelion, the man who had sold god’s love.

It was just past two in the morning.

“There’s a party set in the fridge. There’s tons of ham, olives, and cheese, so it’s all perfect to go with some drinks.”

“Don’t grab the alcohol itself. We’ll be rocked by the waves all the way back and you’ll get a nice greeting from Frolaytia’s iron fist if you return to base smelling of alcohol.”

“I guess we’ll have to save that to use as an offering to that busty commander. What a waste. There’s some that aged for 20 years in a sherry cask! It’s clearly a Legitimacy Kingdom product. We’re taking back artwork stolen by an enemy nation, so why don’t we get a chance to enjoy it!?”

“Oh, there’s a big fishing set too. Looks like it’s for trolling.”

“Now that’s more constructive. Can you catch tuna around here?”

“Think I can catch something?” asked Evans as he quickly began attaching some of the food as bait and casting the thick wires out into the dark ocean. As long as the boat was moving, the electric reels would lure the fish in and reel them in on their own, so it was quite convenient.

Static ran through the ship’s radio.

“There it is,” said Heivia as he bit into some of the chilled chicken.

A moment later, a familiar voice arrived over the device.

“You, civilian ship, stop right there! Oh ho ho. The route to Second Venice is currently off limits in accordance with an Information Alliance military-…bffh!? Wh-what!? But you…? How did you get out there!?”

Blinding light danced through the air.

A mountain-like silhouette appeared in the darkness. Large floodlights shined down from it. These were far more than theatre spotlights. They could not even open their eyes or tell which direction led to Second Venice.

“Damn, my head hurts. My temples are burning. This is a real pain, so you deal with that lonely girl, Quenser.”

Heivia grimaced, removed the radio’s wired microphone from the hook, and tossed it to Quenser.

The student scratched at his head as he spoke into it.

“Sorry, sorry. I know it’s wrong to cheat, but this bastard in my pants just won’t take no for an answer. All I did was take a quick trip over to my mistress’s place and it’s getting late, so could you maybe open up the front door for me?”

One of the rapid-fire beam Gatling cannons opened fire and water vapor exploded near the cruiser.

“Do you *want* to diiii

“Why are you questioning *my* sense, you pervert!?”

“Bh, kh, kh… How much…how much do you have to humiliate me before you’re satisfied, Legitimacy Kingdom? This is information warfare on the level of sneaking into a strictly guarded summit meeting room, leaving behind a plastic bottle instead of a bomb, taking a picture, and revealing it to the world to mock our inadequate security. And you chose the Information Alliance as your opponent!?”

“Hey, you idiot. She’s getting worked up in a weird direction now.”

“M-Miss Oh Ho Ho? Isn’t it about time you played your latest bewitching Idol Elite music video to give us guys some hopes and dreams?”

Quenser tried to make a course correction in a coaxing voice, but it was too late.

A dull sound rumbled through the late night sea and the giant silhouette began to move. Even with the powerful light shining on them, they could not overlook such extreme motion. The two rapid-fire beam Gatling cannons were correcting their aim. They were clearly targeting the cruiser as it moved quickly along the ocean. They could tell all too well that the cannons were slowly turning to match their movement.

The cruiser’s speed had exceeded 100 kph as it seemed to skip along the waves, but that meant nothing if the amphibious Second Generation locked onto them. They could not escape an Object if it was serious about destroying them.

But Quenser and the others were not actually given a watery grave.

The battlefield underwent a change.

It started with an unpleasant sound reminiscent of gas bubbles in a rotting marsh.

The Rush’s various floodlights scattered and then focused on something other than the cruiser. They focused on the very center of the change. Countless air bubbles rose to the surface, creating an area of white in the dark sea. To Quenser, it looked like a jellyfish rivalling a small island in size.

But that was not what this was.

Something appeared as it broke through the dark sea of death.

It was the undead skull that had overcome death several times before supposedly being sunk by the Old Fashion.

It had a single coilgun on the front, four long floats that stretched back behind it, and bug-like legs that spread out to the sides.

Quenser groaned its name.

“The Zombie Object… The Faith Organization’s Lizard Tail!?”

As soon as it appeared, the Rush mercilessly opened fire with her two rapid-fire beam Gatling cannons.

Part 2

As a strategy, it was overwhelmingly correct.

Before the enemy Object could get up to combat speed, the Rush fired its main cannons over and over. A normal Object would have been helplessly destroyed.

But the Lizard Tail was not a normal Object.

This was the Zombie Object. It did not fear destruction and it even built up its legend of immortality each time it was destroyed.

So it did not even try to dodge.

With a roar a lot like rain pouring down on a thin metal roof, the armor surface danced madly about like the katsuobushi on top of the Island Nation style of pizza known as an okonomiyaki. The energy that should have gathered as a beam weapon was randomly dispersed and the damage could not reach the inside.

“Dammit, it’s just a bad match!! Lasers and beam weapons can’t defeat that zombie!!”

“Whose side are you on, Quenser? Who cares if the Information Alliance and Faith Organization kill each other?”

“That thing hijacks the defeated Object and uses the firepower for

itself! If Oh Ho Ho is defeated, that main cannon will target us next!!"

"What!? That's just scary! Hurry up and do something about it!!"

Frightened Heivia continued to guide the cruiser toward Second Venice as quickly as possible, but no matter how far they fled, they were still right in front the Objects which could move at 500 kph.

"Do something? But what can I do against something that doesn't stop even after you kill it?"

As a habit, Quenser ended up kneading some Hand Axe in his hand, but he could not even picture what kind of shape would be useful here. Even if he sliced the thing in half or blew it to smithereens, he could only imagine it crawling back up from the abyss. He was not even sure it had a cockpit and reactor. Those weak points logically had to be there, but after seeing it killed before his eyes so many times, he started imagining it had some kind of occult power. And that may have been a very Faith Organization way of thinking.

As Quenser hesitated, he realized the plastic explosive was turning into a 1/8 scale version of the G-cup idol. He was even using the fountain pen and paper knife he found in the cruiser to recreate the face and ringlet curls.

Meanwhile, Myonri commented on the battle between the Rush and the Lizard Tail.

"Hmm. If there's no way to defeat the zombie, maybe we should defeat the Rush first. If we're afraid of its main cannon being hijacked, it might be best to destroy that main cannon ourselves…"

"…"

"…"

"…"

"Ah!? …N-no, I didn't mean it, everyone. That was just a clever joke to get a discussion started. It's a thought experiment where you eliminate the impossible ideas first until you can start to see the outline of a successful idea! I can't have you taking me seriously!! Tee hee! Smile☆"

Myonri frantically waved her hands back and forth in front of the

guys who began arguing with each other: “This might not be the same as listing ‘education history, bloodline, and salary’ as her first three factors for deciding who to marry, but the reality in a girl’s mind can be enough to send a shiver down my spine.” “Isn’t that a lot like saying we should behead the survivors now to prevent more zombies later?” “Stop it. React to that kind of phrase and you’ll get some female company president in London yelling at you.”

Myonri may have only made the comment because she was so exhausted.

(But if we were really going to do it, how would we?)

Quenser gulped as he looked to the Lizard Tail illuminated by the floodlights. It used a design philosophy of deflecting damage instead of dodging attacks, so that Zombie Object was not unharmed. It could not fully deflect the rapid-fire beam Gatling cannons, so its spherical main body had lines torn across it like the stitches on Frankenstein’s monster.

It also had the giant holes from the Baby Magnum’s low-stability plasma cannon and the Old Fashion’s compressed metal cannon. It had damage in more places than not, so it was creepy seeing it moving around like that. If the reactor and cockpit were located somewhere other than the center, where were they? Quenser was reminded of the magic trick where someone got inside a large box while swords were stabbed in from the outside.

“Wait. Could it be…?”

In most of those box magic tricks, the assistant would actually escape outside the box before the swords were stabbed inside. There might be stairs to climb out the top or a space hidden below it with mirrors.

In that Zombie Object’s case…could it be in the ocean?

Could a thick power cable and a communications cable for piloting extend down into the ocean where the cockpit and reactor had escaped to safety? If a wire was dangling down like that, it would get dragged along during the high-speed movement and might rise up above the surface. But he just had to look at the fishing lines extending behind the cruiser. If the wire was attached to the end of the shark anchor reaching far down below, it would still be around a dozen meters below the surface even when stretched out horizontally.

Quenser grabbed the microphone to the ship radio.

“Listen, Oh Ho Ho. Fire a few of your secondary cannons into the ocean! If that zombie bastard overreacts, then there’s some secret in the dark ocean!!”

“You dare speak to me after treating this world-class idol like a runner up!?”

She complained, but she swiftly complied.

The secondary cannons on the Rush’s side poured a barrage down toward the ocean around the Lizard Tail instead of at the Zombie Object itself. Even though the thick seawater slowed the shells down, they would be plenty destructive at around a dozen meters down. They could easily tear apart any cables unprotected by armor.

But…

“Ho…ho ho. It didn’t respond at all, you moron!!”

“Hmm. Then I guess that isn’t it…”

“That is no way to treat me!!”

Quenser was too lost in thought to listen to Oh Ho Ho’s protests.

Lowering the cockpit and reactor and then reeling them back in if the enemy caught on had seemed like a good idea, but it must not have been the answer. It looked like the Lizard Tail’s weakness really was inside the spherical main body.

“Come to think of it…”

“I refuse to help you any further! Oh ho ho. No matter what!!”

“The Lizard Tail floated up out of the ocean, didn’t it? …But how did it do that? An Object weighs 200,000 tons and it’s filled with onion armor, so it shouldn’t be able to float.”

“I-ignoring me only makes it worse!!”

“That lady-killer is manipulating her pretty well,” commented Heivia. “Anyway, doesn’t it just have some kind of spare part? Like a float. Just before fully surfacing, it probably cut it away.”

“But then the buoyancy would come from the spare part. It would be floating around here somewhere.”

Myonri leaned out and shined the large signal light around, but there was nothing evident in the dark ocean. Lifting the 50 meter Object would take something quite large, so they would not simply overlook it.

“Does the Zombie Object itself act as a float?” asked Evans with a frown. “Maybe it puffs out like a blowfish.”

“We’re getting closer and closer to a zombie now. Blowfish poison was used to make zombie powder, right?”

“This thing is connected to the Greek sect, so I doubt that’s related. But it’s not a bad idea. If it isn’t using some kind of spare part, it means the zombie itself floated up. And the fastest way to gain buoyancy is to fill it with a ton of air. That’s true of swim rings and nuclear subs alike.”

“Wait, you mean…?”

“That’s why no one can hit the cockpit or reactor no matter how much they shoot it. And even if those are main cannons blasts, it was weird that they blew open those giant holes so easily.”

In other words…

“That spherical main body is hollow. I bet the reactor and cockpit are made so they can move freely around inside.”

It was a bold theory.

It was so bold that it took some time for Heivia, Myonri, and Evans to catch up.

“Hold it. Then what are you saying? That the Zombie Object is like a hamster running around in a ball!?”

“If anything, the spherical main body probably has a ton of protrusions on the inside that the small gear-shaped reactor and cockpit use to move around with the interlocking teeth. We’ll know soon enough. We need to focus on the Lizard Tail’s movements.”

Myonri was the first to notice.

She spotted a moment when the Zombie Object made an especially

sharp turn.

“H-huh? Can it really turn that quickly? That looked like it had more to do with a misplaced center of gravity than the air cushion engine.”

“You’re probably right. By shifting the positions of the ‘weights’ inside during a turn, it can intentionally alter its center of gravity. That allows movements that a normal Object couldn’t pull off. And with most of the inside being hollow, its overall weight is a lot lower too. With that much power, it’s probably harder to keep the entire Object from hopping up when it moves at full speed.”

Even if the weak point could freely move within the spherical main body, the Zombie Object’s main purpose was to shift its weak point to avoid any real damage. Without the ability to make quick movements, one lucky hit could sink it.

It was an expert at taking advantage of its own damage. By intentionally allowing a hit while shifting its weak point out of the way, it could finish off its opponent before they could move again. This risky Second Generation was always a step away from death.

“So it makes a show of being immortal?” Heivia gulped. “Is that really so attractive, Faith Organization? The Pilot Elite is clearly wearing away their own life.”

“It’s exactly what you would expect from them. A release from the fear of death is a standard religious idea. That’s the whole point of heaven and reincarnation.”

An immortal soldier that could return to the front line no matter how many times they were defeated had always been an excellent way of increasing the fighting spirit of one’s troops. That seemed to damage their score, but it was still effective at providing courage for the people. It may have had an overwhelming charisma different than an Object that reigned supreme and unscathed.

If it could continue coming home alive, then people would believe in miracles on the battlefield. And they would believe that the son they sent off to war would also return.

The zombie quickly rotated around in search of living flesh.

And its target was of course Quenser and the others on the cruiser heading toward Second Venice.

“Shit! It’s targeting us first!?”

“But why!? Does the Lizard Tail have any reason to go after us first!?”

“Because we have the Argeiphontes antidote?”

“But why start now, Evans? And either way, the deadly mold can’t spread to the whole world with the blockade around the infection base. Surely it isn’t still thinking of burning Second Venice to the ground so the scorched corpses carry the mold back to their families…”

Even as Quenser suggested it, he was rejecting the idea.

After all…

“But then why did it surface here? If it could make a surprise attack from the bottom of the ocean, why didn’t it get as close to Second Venice as possible to attack the city where the Rush couldn’t interfere?”

“It almost seemed to be waiting for us, didn’t it?”

“War isn’t always about efficiency. It might have been nothing more than a personal grudge. Remember that…what was his name? Anyway, that Hermes Pharmaceuticals trash whose legs we broke in the attack on the Olive Garden. If he has a connection to the zombie, I wouldn’t be surprised if he ordered it to take revenge.”

Their speculation was fine, but the most pressing problem was the fact that they were being targeted with pinpoint accuracy by a Second Generation Object. The Lizard Tail was designed for close-range battles, but it was not made to attack tiny cruisers. The Rush stood in its way, but that Object would be destroyed if it took all of the shells, including main cannon shells, meant for the cruiser. Plus, the Information Alliance Second Generation was not obligated to protect the Legitimacy Kingdom idiots.

Thus, the Rush escaped horizontally away from a main cannon blast.

Immediately afterwards, a barrage of smaller shells poured down toward the cruiser like rain.

“Dwah!?”

The Zombie Object may not have accurately locked onto them, but just one coilgun shell falling nearby would be enough. It would form a frightening wave which would capsize the racing cruiser. They did not even have time to think about turning the helm to recover.

“Dammit, jump out!!”

“No, not the booze aged for 20 years in a sherry caaaaaaaaaaaaaaaask!!”

There was nothing they could do.

As soon as the four idiots jumped into the dark ocean, one of the randomly falling metal shells supplied a finishing blow to the cruiser. The wreckage erupted like a volcano, one of the wooden planks hit Quenser, and he experienced one of the double jumps he had thought only existed in games.

“Agfrbaehah!!”

Except it slammed into his back and he started seeing an angel.

By the time he realized the angel veiled in light was unexpectedly macho, quite hairy, and had a butt chin, he came to in the dark ocean.

“Uooaaaaaahh!? Y-you’re kidding!! If you’re going to come for me, at least make the angel a beautiful woman!!”

“You didn’t know, Quenser? Most angels are androgynous. Gabriel is apparently the only one clearly described as a woman.”[1]

“Seriously? Now I can see why people fall into depravity. All the demons are really sexy.” Quenser sounded annoyed. “Anyway, what do we do? I doubt that was it for the zombie bastard. It’ll attack us as soon as the Rush gives it an opening. And we’ll be turned into fish food next time.”

“Why is it even attacking us over the Rush? That threat assessment order is way off.”

“Um, do you think it has to do with this?”

Everyone reacted to Myonri’s words.

She held some kind of paper soaked with seawater. In fact, papers

were floating all around the wreckage of the cruiser. It was more than just five or ten pages.

“What? Where did all this come from?”

“The cruiser may have had a hidden safe. And given who owned it…”

“Veneto Dandelion. So are these secret Hermes Pharmaceuticals documents?”

How much Hermes had to do with this was still a mystery.

They had developed the Argeiphontes that provided the toxicity for the deadly mold and they provided a lot of financial support for the Faith Organization’s Kerukeion special forces that had been working in secret in Second Venice’s infection base. Since the Lizard Tail had entered Second Venice via the asteroid to support Kerukeion, it was likely connected to Hermes as well.

But why would Hermes Pharmaceuticals want to spread the deadly mold carrying Argeiphontes?

They were the only ones with an antidote, so a worldwide pandemic might prove profitable, but it was already known that Hermes had developed the Argeiphontes. Everyone would know who was behind it, so they would be unable to profit from it. In fact, repeating the same disaster was more likely to destroy them beyond recovery this time.

Not to mention that Quenser’s group had been handed a card with something like 3D printer designs rather than the antidote itself. That suggested that Hermes was not prepared to mass produce it.

In that case, their goal was a mystery.

Did Veneto Dandelion actually hold a grudge against Hermes Pharmaceuticals, so he wanted to see the corporation crash and burn? If they were setting aside that sort of self-destructive desire, there was no apparent reason for this master plan.

But the documents about to tear apart from the seawater were on an entirely different level.

They said the following:

“Level 6. A pessimistic report from Hermes’s Secret Division concerning the development of Pilot Elites and how to handle the fast approaching upper limits of human evolution.”

Part 3

It was ridiculous and grandiose.

It sounded a lot like a video game’s flavor text.

Since the documents had been scattered randomly, they were not even in order. But by gathering all of the data they could, they were able to read the following:

This project began as a means to oppose the utterly insolent Information Alliance who are attempting to electronically preserve all forms of culture and civilization – including the holy scriptures – as mere data.

They commonly use supercomputers and AI for government, civilian, industrial, and academic uses, so we had to surpass them in those fields if we were to bring the hammer of judgment down upon them. That said, walking the same path as those fools would have been meaningless.

If the Information Alliance was emphasizing the creation of a mechanical brain, then the holy Faith Organization only needed to take the opposite path.

We would develop the human brain to its limits and mass-produce professional chess players who can overwhelmingly defeat any supercomputer or AI. The shortest path was to develop the Pilot Elites who already had ample government funding and belonged to the closest relevant field. We would place our project on top of that.

“Where are we? Which page is this?”

“Let’s follow the page numbers. They’re numbered on the edge.”

The results were excellent. At least at the current stage, man solidly wins in any battle between the flexibility of the human brain and the high-speed calculations of a supercomputer.

But we have also learned something.

We have learned the limits of humans as humans. That is a wall we will run into no matter how thoroughly we develop the subjects. One-sided tests such as IQ tests or memory challenges do not matter. We at Hermes stand on the front line of producing the cleverest and most useful humans. And that is why we have reached a certain understanding:

Human evolution has an upper limit.

And it is far, far closer than anyone thinks.

A thick concrete ceiling is within arm's reach. That final upper limit cannot be removed no matter what. And we are not simply talking about supercomputers and AIs leaving us behind as they develop further or an inability to keep up with the Information Alliance.

They are the same.

No matter how far we attempt to develop supercomputers and AIs, no progress will be made as long as the humans using them are stuck here. Humans will stop here, stall, and ultimately fall.

Humans will fall into ruin.

And not because of environmental pollution, limited resources, or war.

Humans themselves will harden over from within, lose their possibilities, and destroy themselves.

That is the truth of the coming age.

"Is this serious? Is this actual scientific data!? Hey, Quenser, tell me this is some Faith Organization bullshit like blood type fortune telling!"

"How should I know? I mean, what the hell is this? It's tearing apart!!"

We must make a decision.

The only way to conquer this disease of stagnation and to smash the thick ceiling overhead is…

That was all.

The soaked paper tore and they could not read the rest.

But the bad feeling did not leave their chests. They had taken over an infection base that could create a worldwide pandemic starting from Second Venice and they had brought in a deadly mold that killed all those infected. They had a grand objective that surpassed the benefit to Hermes Pharmaceuticals itself. None of it sounded promising.

There was no stopping the sense of dread.

Quenser grabbed the radio he also used to detonate bombs.

“Can you hear me, Lizard Tail!?”

“Wait, are you stupid!?”

“Or whatever it is the Faith Organization calls you! Dionysus was it!? Anyway, answer me! What are you trying to do with that killer mold!? No, how are you planning to assist mankind with it!?”

An Object’s largescale communications equipment would pick up any bandwidth. And Quenser had not encrypted his transmission. Everyone it reached would be able to hear it.

Contacting them was the easy part.

The question was whether or not they would answer.

“Ksshh. Does this mean you opened the boat’s safe, Legitimacy Kingdom?”

“…Would you look at that. The zombie removed her hat and bowed.”

“This is exactly what it looks like. Argeiphontes was originally developed for riot suppression gas, but there were various issues after that. And an interesting effect was found in addition to the

poison gas aspect. Well, it may be a lot like how a toxic herbicide also contains a concentrated amount of a rare hair growth agent. Of course, if the average person dumps the herbicide over their head, it will instead destroy their entire scalp."

"Kh."

The death rate was 99.8%.

Had this Elite survived that without the antidote bought with money?

"Are you serious? Are you saying you were given god's love for real?"

"Of course not. I was working with Hermes from the beginning, so they had me take the antidote. Or perhaps I should say they stole my right to take the challenge."

They heard light laughter over the radio.

"And that is why it would be a problem for you to bring back that antidote. We must witness the moment when a human overcomes 'that' without using any bought love."

"What are you talking about…?"

"There is no need to get the entire world involved. As long as there is a single success, we win. In Second Venice, there is a miracle human who is still alive through her own strength despite exposure to Argeiphontes, isn't there? That person is attempting to receive the true love without relying on the kind bought with money."

Quenser's thoughts ground to a halt.

And he was finally able to draw a name out of his memories.

"Are you talking about Catherine!?"

"Ironic, isn't it? The last word is going to come from another Elite. But as long as the concrete ceiling eventually crumbles away, nothing else matters. Mankind has stalled, but we have fought to bring us all another step forward. If Catherine Blueangel can accomplish that, she will become our guiding shepherd. I am fine being the Apollonius who vanishes inside her shadow."

"…Is this really that great for her? Catherine is dying."

“Don’t be so sure. You can’t know what will happen until the very last moment. The researchers decided to inject me with the antidote before I reached that point.”

“And what do you plan to do if Catherine does die!?”

“Search for the next candidate. By finding a way to start a pandemic without using Second Venice.”

That was likely her true intent. The Lizard Tail’s Elite or Hermes Pharmaceuticals supporting her had no clue whether or not the “next stage of mankind” would be completed. So they would keep trying until it happened. Even if the planet’s population of seven billion was worn down to a single person, they would count it a success if that person coincidentally happened to do it. This was nothing more than a blind search.

There was no academic theory behind it. They had not taken any statistics.

It was a cult disguised as an academic study. Their farfetched logic was decorated with plausible-sounding reasoning and numbers, but at its foundation, the idea was no different from the millennia-old idea of human sacrifices: if we sacrifice enough people, it’s sure to give us something in return.

Dionysus.

What kind of god had they taken that name from? Their idea of righteousness might be found there, but Quenser did not feel like looking into it. He was certain he would find some depressing and bloody legend.

He summed up his thoughts in a short groan.

“You’re completely insane.”

“Yes, and that is why I was given an Object with this name. And if you ask me, the people relying on something like this to support their world are far more insane.”

A quiet beep followed that mocking voice.

It came from Quenser’s handheld device.

“Hey, this is a military network. How far have they infiltrated it!?”

Heivia voiced his concern, but Quenser had other things to worry about.

He hesitantly pulled out the handheld device and glanced through the received email.

A photograph was attached.

It resembled a wriggling anatomical model.

It looked like each of the organs and bones had been removed, placed in smooth transparent containers, and then neatly rearranged in a model of the human body.

“Ugh.”

Quenser felt sick to the stomach.

This was not a corpse. Tubes and cables connected it all together in place of blood vessels and nerves, so this was a living person. As soon as he realized that, he felt a second wave of nausea.

Their opponent was a Zombie Object.

So was its Pilot Elite also a living corpse?

“Urp!?”

“One year to live. After the doctor saw the shadow on the X-ray and told me that, I was made into this. The higher ups may have found this easier to control. I am only arranged as a single entity during missions…in other words, in the cockpit. Normally, each individual part is stored in a separate facility where they only wriggle in response to electric signals and receive nutrients from tubes. Strangely, no single piece is ‘me’ while broken apart. The center of my consciousness dose not reside in my brain. Cut away the brain as well and I just seem to float around while my thoughts and memories grow hazy. I assume that is because I am formed from the whole of the data stored in the nerves and organs.”

This person could only maintain her identity while inside the cockpit.

She could not even tell where her core was if someone else did not connect her together.

This was a witch’s pot that even toyed with the human heart.

“It can’t be…”

“But when they were gathering parts for the second Object being built in secret, I surreptitiously rewrote a few electronic documents to slip some ‘biological samples’ into a container. That is my current victory. With no face or body, I am now a mere component that can be easily replaced just by replacing a label on the outside. Dionysus is the god who transcends life and death and a god whose worshipers sink into madness through their rituals. That is the true identity of this clean age protected by Objects. Now, is this the right thing to do? Or is it insane? What would you say as you look in from the outside?”

It was definitive.

Quenser had a full body and had never been packed up in boxes, so he was left speechless.

“Now, boy. Do you think this age has a future? Now that the myth of safety brought by Objects has grown brittle, do the poor and foolish humans have a future?”

Or perhaps the Lizard Tail’s goal was not evolving mankind at all. Perhaps it was simply one person’s revenge against the oppressive age that had gone this far. That was how it felt to Quenser. In that case, there was no need for a miraculous survivor to appear. Even if all seven billion people were exterminated by the deadly mold carrying the Argeiphontes, this Elite would still achieve her objective.

“…I’m sorry.”

“Oh, there’s no need to feel sorry. I become a ghost once the promised year passed. My dead body is only an empty shell. How to use it is up to you, the ones who have lived on.”

“No, not that.”

“?”

He breathed in and out.

He faced the horrific truth and spoke.

“Even after hearing that, I still want to save Catherine. I want to save that girl who longs to leave the battlefield countries and live in

a safe country. Even if it has to happen in this shitty age!!”

A short silence followed.

Finally, he heard a quiet breath over the radio.

“Heh.”

It may have been a laugh.

Although he had his doubts that the Pilot Elite could still produce such a human expression after being so thoroughly remade into a system.

Or perhaps that affirmation was a form of admiration.

The Pilot Elite lying alone in her hospital bed had someone who would attack the executives of Hermes Pharmaceuticals and even face the colossal weapons that had ended the nuclear age. That was something this Elite had never had. She had never had a foolish but warm person who would reject the age that had imprisoned her. Perhaps the undead Elite approved of that.

But not as a friend.

Only as an enemy on the battlefield.

“In that case…”

“Yes…”

They spoke at the same time.

It did not matter that one was a puny battlefield student and the other was an Elite one step away from heaven.

“I’ll defeat you and continue on ahead!!”

“I’ll defeat you and continue on ahead!!”

Part 4

In the dark ocean, Heivia’s mouth flapped in consternation next to

the idiot who had just picked a fight.

“There’s no way we can win!! We don’t even have the cruiser anymore! So how are you gonna face this Object? The breaststroke? The butterfly? Freestyle?”

“Don’t worry, Heivia. We’re the ones risking our lives for a cute little sister. That means we can’t lose to a villain.”

“This is the problem with only children. You have nothing to base that on, so it’s basically a superstition!! How about you go join the Faith Organization and start up a Church of the Little Sister, you idiot!? You can pray to your twintailed idol every day and wear striped panties in place of a mitre! And instead of bread and wine, you can smile peacefully while eating burned fried eggs and drinking coffee with salt mistaken for sugar!!”

“That’s an oddly detailed scenario you’ve got there, Heivia.”

But complaining was not going to change anything. The Zombie Object would be viewing all four of the idiots as the Church of the Little Sister’s crazed worshipers. So if they did nothing, they would be blown away in the name of purification or something.

The Lizard Tail was still showing off its status as the undead. The Rush was showing off its own impressive ability, but it could not fully kill the other Object. A normal Object would have been destroyed ten times over by now, but the Zombie Object continued moving after every single clean hit.

“Damn. That thing’s armor has got to be way thinner than a normal Object’s. It would probably be better to use an outdated nuclear weapon for this. It can’t dodge a wide-area attack, so it’d definitely melt and sink.”

“And where do we find one of those? And it’d be the end of us if one detonated near here.”

“…”

(Thin armor… It isn’t made to survive a nuclear weapon?)

Quenser thought for a bit and then looked up in realization.

The Zombie Object already had several holes in it and the surface of the spherical main body was torn to shreds.

(Wait. Would…that work?)

“Frolaytia!!”

He grabbed his radio again and their busty silver-haired commander answered.

“Our conversation is being monitored. If this is about an emotional suicide attack or empathizing with the enemy, I’m not listening.”

“We can defeat that thing. I just need approval and support.”

“That’s more like it. What should we do?”

“Gather all of the Baby Magnum’s armor panels you can.”

“The repair work is still underway, but it is not yet ready to send to the front line. A high-speed battle is still just a dream. It’s going to take another twelve hours no matter how hard we work.”

“That’s not what I was hoping for.” Quenser adjusted his grip on the wet radio. “You only have to gather the countlessly layered onion armor sections that shield against nuclear blasts and electromagnetic waves!!”

Part 5

One form of nuclear attack was to emit an electromagnetic pulse over a wide area.

By detonating the nuke outside the atmosphere, the massive radiation emitted would collide with the atmosphere and produce a special type of electromagnetic pulse that swept across the surface. This is skipping some details, but a hit from it would destroy all semiconductors and thus fry all electronics and means of communications over an entire city or country. Early warning radars, tanks, and fighter craft would all stop functioning. And intelligence was everything in modern wars, so that was often viewed as the first wave in a largescale war.

But an electromagnetic pulse attack of course required a nuclear missile, so the preparation was not easy. The strategy was

impossible to pull off in this Object-focused clean age that had graduated from the nuclear age.

At the same time, there were also microwave bombs that made a similar intelligence attack but on a smaller scale. By sticking a battery-powered high-power transmitter in the warhead and firing it at enemy territory, their communication network and electronics could be destroyed.

That might make microwaves sound special and amazing, but it was their low cost, high reliability, and lower scale that allowed them to pull off almost the same effect as a nuclear weapon when it came to an intelligence attack.

But that was not exclusive to microwaves.

Have you ever experienced this in a hospital?

When having an X-ray or CT scan done, patients are told to remove their wristwatch or cellphone. That is because the electronics could be destroyed by the powerful X-rays, which are electromagnetic waves with a different wavelength than microwaves.

In other words…

“The power is what matters and the wavelength is fairly unimportant,” whispered Quenser as he floated in the dark sea. “And the Zombie Object made its armor as thin as it could to pull off its concept. And that means it threw out what was needed to end the nuclear age. That means its shielding has got to be weaker too. And I’m not just talking about impacts and heat; I’m talking about invisible electromagnetic waves and radiation!!”

He grabbed his radio.

He did not care if they found out what he was after. The pieces were in place on the board, so it was too late to do anything about it. So without any real encryption, Quenser gave his final instruction to the Information Alliance’s Rush.

“Oh Ho Ho!! If you don’t want to die, say ‘woof’ and swing your right main cannon around!!”

“Wahyah!? Y-you want me say wooooooooooooooooooof!!???”

The great Idol Elite was so thoroughly confused that she barked for

the lowly student and swung her main cannon for him.

It left an orange trail along the Lizard Tail's spherical main body, but it did not supply a fatal blow.

But that was not what Quenser was after.

"This just has to shift the Zombie Object's position. Or to be more accurate, it just has to turn one of the large holes this way."

The surefire attack would come from someone more than ten kilometers away.

In other words…

"If we focus powerful radar waves on that point, they'll break through your thin shielding and fry your electronics, Lizard Tail!!"

Part 6

In that instant…

"Take cover! All hands, take cover!! Whether you're in the path or not, all maintenance soldiers are to take cover indoors!!"

Chaos filled the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion on the coast of Malta across from Second Venice.

The Baby Magnum still could not fight at high speeds and was stuck as a stationary gun platform, but its main cannons and secondary cannons were not the star of the show.

That position was taken by the largescale radar that worked in conjunction with one of the main cannons.

EMP and radiation shielding had been placed around it like flower petals, creating something like a parabolic antenna or a trumpet shape. Light and electromagnetic waves had similar properties. Or perhaps it was better to say that visible light was a form of electromagnetic waves. Regardless, a parabolic antenna focused electromagnetic waves on a single point just like a concave lens focused light.

A weapon as colossal as an Object could be equipped with a great variety of weapons. The same was true of radars. They never knew what kind of interference they would receive, so they were made to use all sorts of wavelengths.

The Princess had chosen an extremely shortwave radar.

The electromagnetic waves were close to the range commonly known as X-rays, so they would pass through the average unshielded matter. The entire point of radar was to determine the number and position of opponents by catching the waves that hit something and bounced back, so electromagnetic waves that passed through things would normally be useless. That radar was only helpful when some extremely special chaff had been used.

“Radar lock.”

But this was an exception.

The Princess reached a finger toward a square radar button instead of the trigger.

She was more than 20 km away. The horizon became an issue at that distance, but that also gave her some leeway in the height restriction. She would have no problem targeting the 50m Lizard Tail from the similarly tall Baby Magnum.

“Begin emission.”

She pressed the button.

The destruction was invisible and silent.

Part 7

It ended just like a toy being switched off.

The Lizard Tail had been zigzagging back and forth, so it was unable to apply the brakes and slipped right into the dark ocean. The air cushion engine that kept it afloat had died, so the great speed caused the Object itself to skip across the ocean a few times like a stone.

But that did not last forever.

The sequence of jumps came to an end and it collapsed on its side. The dark seawater bubbled in through the many holes on its spherical main body and it sank helplessly.

There was no death cry or curse of resentment.

The Pilot Elite had been so thoroughly built into the system that she may have died when the electronics were destroyed.

Whether that should be called murder or salvation was a matter of faith.

And Quenser did not glorify his sin.

“The dead has been buried at sea.”

The Zombie Object that had been sunk once before by the Old Fashion. That had been an act and the Object had waited for the perfect time to resurface.

But Quenser had a feeling this was different.

“Oh ho ho. So what are you going to do now? I am the Elite of an Information Alliance Object. I have no reason to overlook the Legitimacy Kingdom who would disturb law and order.” The Idol Elite spoke over the radio. “Are you going to ask for help from your filthy First Generation who is stuck as a stationary gun platform? Oh ho ho. But keep in mind that my Gatling 033’s electromagnetic shielding is perfect. You cannot destroy my electronics so easily.”

Quenser of course knew that.

That had only worked on the Lizard Tail due to its bizarre design created to pull off the paradox of never dying no matter how many times it was destroyed. The Rush had evolved in the proper direction, so it would have little effect against her.

Oh Ho Ho was definitely the queen of this battlefield.

So Quenser obediently raised his hands as he drifted through the dark ocean.

“Please help me, Oh Ho Ho.”

“Why? Why would I do anything for the Legitimacy Kingdom that

made such a fool of me!?"

"Take a look at the ocean currents, you idiot."

"Wha-!?"

"We drifted to the Olive Garden by grabbing onto some unpowered driftwood. That means we'll end up right back there if you don't do anything. However, we want to fight that current and get to Second Venice. So how about it, Oh Ho Ho? Do you really want us to run out of steam and drift back outside? Keep in mind that we might just be infected."

"Wha-, wha-, wha-…"

"Just to be clear, blowing us to smithereens still leaves a chance of a limb or organ washing up somewhere. And depending on the traits of the Pathogen X set up in the infection base, it's perfectly possible someone can be infected from a corpse. Your defenses here are just full of holes. If you want to keep your quarantine going, then just do what I say. So shut up and save us. Bow your head like a servant, shake your cute butt like a maid, and obey like a coachman whipping the carriage horses. Got that, *you Worthless Little Idol*?"

"Whaaa

The blonde braided girl thought about what that meant.

Then she heard some voices from nearby. They came from within the same booth separated out by curtains.

Some sweaty guys were sitting on the round stools for visitors.

“Man, this is great. That’s what you call a perfect victory. Nothing feels better than making a G-cup Idol Elite cry. It’s like the cool summer wind is flowing straight through my entire body.”

“I’m more afraid that a bastard as sadistic as you is starting up the Church of the Little Sister. That’s an awful combination and I think the last judgment is approaching fast.”

Catherine blinked her eyes, but Quenser and Heivia only shrugged.

“We gave you the antidote, but you probably haven’t fully recovered yet. You should get some more sleep.”

“You can rely on everyone else, just like when you have a cold. We’ll go along with it as long as you don’t get a taste for it and pretend to be sick.”

They readily spoke of an antidote.

But she could not even imagine what it had taken to acquire it.

“Big brother, you all did this…?”

“Of course he did. Who else is gonna set a world-class casino island ablaze, break the legs of an international corporation’s executive, and finish it all off by sinking an undead Zombie Object? And he didn’t do any of it for the betterment of mankind. It was all for his cute little sister. There’s something severely wrong with him!!”

“Acting cool isn’t the only sign of a great guy. Seeing a hot-blooded Quenser was nice for once, don’t you think?”

As they spoke, Quenser pressed the nurse call button lying on the side of the bed. When the medic girl arrived, he informed her that Catherine had woken up.

They apparently did not plan to stick around for long.

But Catherine doubted that was just to keep out of the doctor’s way. She sensed something in the boys’ backs that was hurrying them

along.

She sat up in the bed and asked about it.

“Is there…something more?”

“Don’t worry. We’ll end it all soon enough.”

“The Baby Magnum’s repairs will be done before long. That will at least bring everything back to the starting point. If we can work together to open up a way out, we can keep all the civilians from starving to death.”

Their opponent required having their Object fully functional.

And even that only brought it back to the starting point. It was a battle they did not know if they could win.

Catherine spoke the natural answer.

“Are you finally going to settle things with the Information Alliance’s Rush?”

But the boys shook their heads.

And they answered by speaking the name of the grim reaper.

“No, our final obstacle is the Faith Organization’s First Generation Old Fashion.”

External Document – Motive for the Crime

I have no interest in ruling the world or expanding Faith Organization territory.

All I seek is my promise with an old friend.

I will use this power to show the world its possibility.

In this age, the people are unable to oppose the decisions of the four world powers and they must live on the food they are given like farm animals. I will show them that people are more than that. No matter how many brilliant scientists and extraordinary

supercomputers they bring together to calculate out their numbers and data, I will face them head-on and crush them underfoot. I will show everyone that such exceptions exist. And that exception will give courage to the people. That was what I promised my friend.

And my friend held up his end of the promise by building the most powerful Object.

So I only need to pilot that Object as the most powerful Elite.

Dionysus's plan to break through the upper limits of humanity was a fascinating idea. It may have been somewhat interesting to see whether or not that had created an Elite capable of reaching my level. But it is not worth going out of my way to pursue. I believe that mankind is a superb life form even without an extreme change to our environment.

I wish to see a true genius.

No, I wish to see a superb human who can surpass me.

I want to ensure that no one can ever say that mankind has hit the upper limit of our possibilities and that we can evolve no further. If my presence lights a fire in the hearts of my rivals and eventually allows someone to surpass me, then I will have fulfilled my promise to my old friend.

My name is Robert Mistynail.

My Object has been given the name Cronus. I walk the path of the ace while bearing the name of an old god whose value is found in his defeat by Zeus.

Day 7

Part 1

It was the seventh and final day.

If they did not settle things and secure an escape route from Second Venice today, they would run out of food and water and everyone would die, military and civilian alike.

They got as much rest as they could beforehand.

Win or lose, this battle would decide everything, so they could not afford to be worn out.

Do-or-die was not a phrase to be used lightly, but it was an accurate description of the situation for the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion.

"Let's review the situation."

Early in the morning, Frolaytia Capistrano had summoned everyone in the battalion to the briefing room.

She removed the restrictions on knowledge about the infection base and killer mold and shared the details with everyone.

"The Argeiphontes is the primary component of a poison gas, but Quenser and Catherine's cases have proven that the antidote is effective. The electronic simulation division is busy putting together a report. You could say they're putting some pretty wrapping paper around the unadorned present, but once they're done, the Information Alliance will lose their justification for their blockade. Once they understand that people can be tested for an infection and that the infected can avoid certain death with the antidote, their indiscriminate quarantine becomes nothing more than a human rights violation."

A mixture of surprise and relief filled the briefing room.

They had simultaneously been informed of the deadly mold and the fact that they need not fear it. They must not have had time to

decide whether or not to feel frightened.

“Thus, there is no need to force a confrontation with the Information Alliance’s Rush. With their justification gone, they should blush and withdraw in embarrassment. …The problem is this: The Faith Organization’s First Generation Old Fashion.”

Its technology was inferior even to the Baby Magnum’s.

That solitary ace could have switched to a cutting-edge derivate model at any time, but he had stubbornly stuck with the old model to keep a promise with an old friend. That should have fully cut him off from the flow of time, but he had continued to battle cutting-edge Objects in his First Generation. He was enough of a genius to make up for the inadequate technology with his piloting skill. He was brilliant enough to pull off that one-man showmanship inside the military, an organization that wished for group action from top to bottom.

“Robert Mistynail.” Frolaytia spoke the monster’s name. “He is the greatest success and his name always shows up in reference material concerning Pilot Elite development. Supercomputers have supposedly ‘solved’ chess to a level that no human can defeat them, but he has the insane brain needed to ignore that conclusion and win three world championships. He is reliable yet unpredictable. A group of Information Alliance scientists attempted to fine-tune a competitive AI learning program for use against him specifically, but they ended up throwing in the towel. Legend has it those scientists got drunk at a bar near their lab and were overheard complaining that his synapses had to form a wormhole.”

The Old Fashion and the Lizard Tail were both from the Faith Organization.

And the Old Fashion had made an attempt to defeat the Rush and rescue the civilians trapped in Second Venice. If he had known about the infection base from the beginning, that would mean he had tried to spread the deadly mold carriers throughout the world.

Frolaytia than named someone else with her kiseru in her mouth.

“Quenser.”

“Yes?”

“You were the one who interacted with the Old Fashion *afterwards*,

so you explain it."

It was now the student's turn to get up on the podium.

"I don't know how it started. Maybe he was working with Hermes and maybe he wasn't. But at the very least, Robert has now left the plan to break through mankind's upper limits using the Argeiphontes. His actions appear gentlemanly at first glance, but that was only the setup. He was setting the stage to give him a justification for an enjoyable battle. Both breaking through mankind's upper limits and rescuing the starving people from Second Venice would have worked just fine for him."

On Quenser's instruction, a soldier from the electronic simulation division in charge of voice analysis replayed the master data.

"This is the radio transmission I received on the way back with antidote yesterday. The analysis says it was definitely Robert."

The recording said as follows:

"I see. So the tide is turning. Having the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance join forces to protect Second Venice while I aim to destroy it might just be the most exciting possibility."

"He went out of his way to announce his intentions." Quenser explained how dangerous Robert Mistynail was. "It would have been easy to act like he was on our side only to stab the Princess and Oh Ho Ho in the back. If they were escorting a fleet carrying civilians to safety, the Baby Magnum and Rush would have been unable to make use of their great speed for fear of sinking those ships. By announcing his hostility, he put us on guard before we began a largescale escape operation. And he even gave us the best possible advice: our best bet is to have the Princess and Oh Ho Ho work together. This is the true nature of an ace. He wants to experience genius and see truly superb people. That sounds fine on its own, but he's really only in it for the fun. He wants to experience as great a thrill as possible. I don't know what age he comes from, but he wants to be reminded of old times. By stubbornly sticking with that outdated Object, he wants to once more enjoy an age frozen in the past. That is his only reason for piloting his Object."

Robert Mistynail was indeed a genius Object pilot.

But it was impossible for him to function within an organization like the military.

The military likely had no intention of getting him to listen. They simply let him loose where it was convenient and reaped the benefits. It was a lot like turning a naturally-occurring typhoon or hurricane toward an enemy nation. The fact that he had something that made the military want to protect him made him seem all the more monstrous.

“We cannot avoid a battle with him,” summed up Frolaytia. “He knows Second Venice’s food and water limit and he will use that to force us into a naval battle. He has heard the legends of the abnormal strength of injured animals and starving soldiers, so he is licking his lips in anticipation of discovering if they are true or not.”

“Frolaytia, have you contacted the Rush…or rather, the Information Alliance?”

“I’m about to. We have no room for negotiation until we can logically explain the traits of the deadly mold and that there is no need for an indiscriminate quarantine. But once the electronic simulation division completes their report, that should go well. This whole incident had to have hurt the Information Alliance’s diplomatic image. I can’t say all’s well that ends well, but if they can work toward as peaceful a resolution as possible, they might be able to avoid a concentrated attack by global public opinion.”

“In other words, the Information Alliance will have to act tough while making sure they do what we want, huh? Yeah, if we don’t ask them for help, they’re stuck being the villains here. …Damn that Oh Ho Ho. I’ll make her bark for me but only after getting down on all fours and spinning around thrice.”

“Try not to mix business with pleasure, Quenser. …But it’s true this could be fun. Threatening their commander over the camera might not be a bad idea.”

They were mixing in some fun even with their lives and the futures of hundreds of thousands of civilians on the line, but that was the 37th’s style.

To get back on track…

“The Old Fashion itself is an old model, so we have quite a bit of data on it. It uses a simple two-by-two layout of amphibious air cushions and its main cannon is a tricky compressed metal cannon, but it’s pretty standard if you view it as a metal shell fired by gunpowder. …In fact, it looks like we won’t have any problems

with both the Baby Magnum and Rush to work with, so I'm not really sure what else to do. This should be an easy victory, and yet we're cornered. It's like running across a situation where one plus one isn't two."

If they chalked it up to a difference in Elite skill, the discussion ended there.

To win, they needed to keep thinking in some way or another.

"He uses countless tactics, so the electronic simulation division can't keep up. The one thing we can say is that he is not making up for his old tech by eliminating all waste and reaching the optimal answer. In fact, he would be a lot easier to predict if that were the case. The Old Fashion is…how should I put it? He seems to add some meaningless playfulness and leeway into his strategies. It was likely the way he strays from the optimal answer that kept the Information Alliance's competitive AI from catching up with him."

He probably enjoys fighting, thought Quenser.

Or perhaps he was addicted to the thrill of putting his life in danger. No AI focused on logic and efficiency could outdo him. And that included this ultimate Elite's insane desire to use his outdated Object against someone technologically superior to him.

He was strong.

He was simply strong.

He was an old-fashioned style of strong that tried to enjoy the difference in specs and even the difference in number of Objects. He was a living embodiment of a legendary warrior. Instead of fearing a formidable foe or growing irritated at a difficult situation, this insane genius would laugh, thank them for giving him a chance to get serious, and pleasantly break through it all.

He wished to converse with a true genius through the medium of combat.

If that really was his only goal, then the Old Fashion would have no interest in Second Venice. He saw the island as bait for the Baby Magnum and Rush, but it was no more than that. After destroying the two Objects, he might even open the way for the starving people because they were of no more use to him.

The people comfortable in their safe countries on the other side of the world might see that has a gentleman's or warrior's heart. When some heard the story with handkerchief in hand, they might even think about basing a new song or movie on it.

But the people here would lose everything.

They could not allow the Princess or Oh Ho Ho to be chewed up and spat out by him.

They would defeat him here.

"What do we do?" groaned Heivia. "Is there any way to beat this guy?"

"There is," answered Quenser. "We just have to take that playfulness and leeway from him. If we do, won't he have to recompile his actions into something we can predict?"

Part 2

It was strange for the final battle to be the most relaxed, but they truly had nothing left after this one.

Heivia spoke to Quenser as they left the large vehicle that functioned as a briefing room.

"Hey! I hear we're gonna get you-know-what up and running. And I can't believe we've got another new weapon after all this."

"Well, Second Venice does belong to the Information Alliance. Frolaytia apparently made a deal with their military, so they shared data on a district not found on the public maps."

"So is this gonna work?"

"The problem is how hard it is to calculate any of that out. We're up against Mr. Strongest here."

They ran across a bodyguard team who surrounded the Princess in her blue special suit.

She seemed to notice them.

“I’ve been stuck in the Object this entire time.”

“This is no time to be sulking. We’ve been crawling through a bunch of gray rubble, so I wish I’d been able to stay nice and comfortable with an air conditioner and fridge.”

“Mh. It wasn’t easy for me either.”

“Well, yeah. It couldn’t have been fun sitting there in a motionless gun platform. It’s the toughest thing we have, but it was also the easiest target.”

The Baby Magnum’s repairs were complete, so it was finally back up and running. And since Frolaytia had gained the cooperation of the Information Alliance, the Princess no longer had to be prepared for battle around the clock. They probably wanted a chance to perform a condition check on the Pilot Elite herself.

And speaking of Pilot Elites, there was another one here.

After Quenser and Heivia left the Princess, they walked to the general medical building where a small girl with a blond braid waited for them.

“Big brother…”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. You don’t need to get up.”

Catherine had started to sit up, but Quenser held out a hand to stop her.

The back of her head sank into the pillow once more.

“I’ve heard most of it. And it sounds like you really weren’t kidding about taking on the Old Fashion.”

“Why would I kid about that?”

“You can simulate a way to defeat the Baby Magnum or the Rush. …But you can’t with Robert Mistynail. Even if you have every last bit of information, the calculations never work. Do you really think you can defeat someone like that?”

Quenser could not deny that he was afraid.

Even without Robert's legendary status, simply facing an Object was frightening.

But he could not stand still.

"We will end this today," he said. "And we'll send you to a safe country. We'll send you somewhere where the rules of the Object-filled battlefield countries can't reach you. That's why we can fight."

"…"

When they saw Catherine pull the blanket up to cover her face, the two idiots left the room.

"You sure like to act cool."

"You know as well as I do that I have to say that or I'll piss myself."

Meanwhile, Major Frolaytia Capistrano held her kiseru in her mouth and faced her notebook computer in her private room. The video chat mode was active and it displayed a brown-skinned woman with long silver hair who was apparently the Information Alliance base commander.

"That was a very interesting document. But depending on how you look at it, you might be missing the main point. We will be going back over everything from the ground up."

"Enough posturing. No matter how much you review that report, you will not find any errors. I feel bad for making you read a 200+ page epic, but I can sum up what that report means in a single sentence: You're in trouble, Information Alliance. Now, what will you do? You forced some very public casualties on the world to draw out the culprit, but without a chance to recover, you really will sink this time, Lieutenant Colonel Lendy Farolito."

"…"

"What we need to do is break free of this situation. I think we can both agree with that. But if you have time to search for nonexistent mistakes, then the wise thing to do would be to cut your losses and help us. Second Venice will dry up soon. If we do not defeat the Old Fashion and open the way out, hundreds of thousands of civilians

will die. And a lot of them are wealthy or VIPs, so that will create a lot of resentment. And since Second Venice originally belonged to the Information Alliance and the trouble began as soon as it was taken from you, responsibility lies with you. Aren't you the ones who will suffer the most if this bomb goes off?"

"But you have no time."

"So you think you can find excuses to delay negotiations until we're desperate enough to give you a better deal? Don't be ridiculous, you crafty woman. You're the ones without any time. The last train is about to leave the station. We will send it out whether it has any passengers or not, so you will be the ones left in tears if you do not board it in time."

"Do you really think we can agree to a plan where our Gatling 033 acts as your shield!?"

"It was on your orders that the Rush blew away a transport ship with thirty days' worth of food and living supplies and – more importantly – a crew of forty. Second Venice was a threat as an infection base, so you had no real reason to kill anyone coming in. You only had to add them to the quarantine list after they arrived. But you still fired. You wanted to avoid dragging out the issue and you wanted us to starve as soon as possible. Did you think you could strut around the world without paying for that?"

"…Tch. Understood, Major Frolaytia Capistrano."

"Say woof."

"Wha-!?"

"I'm sorry, lieutenant colonel. But in my unit, this is how we reeducate useless trash. You can refuse if you want, but my demands will only grow harsher as time passes. I would suggest learning who is in charge before I make you pose and beg like a dog. Got that, war buddy?"

After returning to the Baby Magnum's cockpit, the Princess put on her goggles, operated the console with her fingertips, and confirmed that the naval floats had properly linked to the system.

(That just leaves the hardware.)

“Hello? Old lady?”

“What is it? We’re busy sewing up your dress, so keep it short. We’ve got to get you to the ball in time.”

“You’re shorthanded, aren’t you? I’ll head down and help.”

With that said, she unzipped her special suit, stripped it off, and tied the side knots to transform her naked body into a blue bikini. She used the cockpit seat elevator to exit the Object and found herself in a world where thick wires functioned as scaffolding. It looked like Gulliver had been tied up.

A few of the male maintenance soldiers whistled, but the old lady personally shoved them all into the ocean. The wiser guys kept their heads down and focused on their work. Seeing that bikini meant death.

“Is there anything I can do?”

“You can start by taking a refresher course on ethics. Anyway, we’re replacing the onion armor, so if you’re willing to face the welding sparks in a bikini, then grab a mask and burner and come with me.”

When the Princess picked up the tools, a transmission reached the radio in the tool belt around her waist.

It was from the G-cup Oh Ho Ho, Pilot Elite of the Information Alliance’s Second Generation Rush.

“Oh ho ho. Honestly, to think I would have to fight alongside you of all people.”

“I’m trying to work right now, so don’t talk to me.”

“I mean, I don’t know how much the Faith Organization’s Powder Cannon 011 can do, but it’s just a moldy old First Generation, isn’t it? I can handle this on my own, so you should really thank me for letting you share the credit. Oh ho ho.”

“…”

“A filthy First Generation should be able to take on another First Generation, but apparently you have so little confidence in yourself that you had to come crying to a cutting-edge Second Generation like me. How sad. Oh ho ho. We may be working together, but

make no mistake here. You are nothing more than the backup dancer. You should thank me for even letting you stand on the same stage as me. Make sure – make *very* sure! – that none of your shots accidently hit me! Now, the Gatling 033 can shrug off a puny old First Generation attack, but you must know your place on the stage. Honestly, you are bad enough on your own, but that gentleman has some nerve too! I only decided to mess with him a little because I was curious, but he seems to have misinterpreted it and gotten carried away. I should probably teach him who exactly is in charge here. Oh ho ho! Yes, after blowing the Powder Cannon 011 to smithereens right in front of him, I can aim my Gatling cannon at him and have him beg for his life. Oh ho ho ho ho!! Oh ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho!!"

The Princess looked up in her blue bikini.

That Elite had inherited the genes of the 37th, so she was as blunt as any of them.

"Sit. Shut up and wait for me, you mutt."

Part 3

The final battle began at noon.

The Faith Organization's First Generation Old Fashion appeared 30 km out from Second Venice. That forced the united Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance group to drop what they were doing and respond.

That solitary ace determined everything about this battlefield.

Quenser, Heivia, and the rest of the soldiers quickly prepared to head out to sea.

"This is a goddamn emergency!! Did we manage to get everything ready in time!?"

"We just have to start with what we do have ready! Let's go!!"

At this point, there was no reason to leave anyone on standby to establish a rotation. Almost all of the 37th Mobile Maintenance

Battalion's soldiers were sent out to sea. They used a great variety of vehicles: patrol boats, hovercraft, water scooters, and rubber motor boats.

The Baby Magnum took the lead.

Not only was it the key to everything, but the Object could freely move around at more than 500 kph. No normal boat could keep up.

Quenser watched the giant Object leave while crammed into a small patrol boat with other soldiers.

"If this ends nice and quickly, I'm not going to complain."

"Like that'll happen. Hey, looks like the Information Alliance is here. It's the Rush."



A Second Generation surrounded by missile destroyers arrived from a different direction. It kept pace with the fleet for a while, but then the fleet changed formation. The ships opened up in front, releasing the Rush to join the Baby Magnum.

“D-does the Legitimacy Kingdom not even know how to show a bare minimum of appreciation!? You all do nothing but mock me!!”

“C’mon, it’s time for your walk. Come with me, little doggy.”

“Kiiiii!!”

The soldiers frowned when they heard the radio exchange and the two idiots exchanged a glance.

“Are they arguing about something?”

“I’m getting through this by mentally transforming it into a world of beautiful lily flowers. I don’t want even a hint of further trouble right now.”

Then there was the final Object.

The Faith Organization’s First Generation Old Fashion.

It had not moved since arriving. It had invaded this naval territory and yet it was maintaining the position it had chosen for itself. Why? For the tingling thrill and blood-boiling battle.

“This won’t be one-against-one, but you don’t mind, do you?”

“Of course not. This is war. There is not a single reason why our conditions must be identical. So come at me with everything you can muster. In fact, one-against-two feels somewhat lacking, defenders of Second Venice.”

“No,” cut in the Princess.

She did not hesitate to make her announcement with her fleet behind her.

“Including all of the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance troops, we are taking you on two-thousand-against-one, Mr. Solitary Ace.”

Part 4

The battle had finally begun.

When using multiple Objects, there was no real reason to fire from the same direction. In fact, spreading the Objects out and firing from multiple directions increased the odds of a hit.

Plus, the Rush's main cannons were rapid-fire beam Gatling cannons. Simply by swinging them around while firing allowed her to fully cover 180 degrees to her left and right. A battle on land might have mountains or valleys to hide behind, but this was a naval battle. Most Objects could not escape the deadly sabre as it swept horizontally across.

But that sort of assumption did not work with the Old Fashion.

As soon as the rapid-fire beam Gatling cannons began pursuing him, Robert Mistynail did not hesitate to charge forward. He accurately decided which of his two-by-two floats to lift and which to lower to make sharp turns and position himself behind the Baby Magnum.

To avoid friendly fire, the Rush was forced to stop her Gatling cannons.

"Oh, honestly!!"

Meanwhile, the Baby Magnum was not just sitting still. She moved quickly left and right just like mixed martial arts footwork while constantly targeting the Old Fashion with her seven main cannons. This was like avoiding a tank's gun by hiding behind another tank. He would normally get hit by a point-blank blast.

But even then…

"What…? I can't hit him from this range!?"

"It isn't that surprising. The instant laser beams were brought to the battlefield, Object battles were destined to become competitions in predicting each other's actions. Distance and speed don't matter. As long as you can predict it, it doesn't matter what they try to do to you."

The Old Fashion's main cannon squirmed.

The targeting lenses whirred as they focused.

"Show me, cutting-edge Elites. It can be acrobatics or technology, but do something to surprise this aging man."

Quenser and the others watched from the side, but they were not here as spectators.

"We need to get started too, Heivia!"

“That thing scares the shit out of me!! It’s a First Generation, so it has plenty of anti-personnel, anti-vehicle, and anti-fortress weapons, right!? It’s made to target us, so do we really have to get close!?”

The Baby magnum and Old Fashion exchanged cannons blasts while making detailed movements from less than 100 meters apart. But the countless secondary cannons growing from the Faith Organization First Generation’s spherical main body began to move as if blowing in the wind.

“Here it comes!!”

Quenser gave a yell and the entire army began taking countermeasures.

With a roar much like the fireworks signifying the beginning of an athletic festival, something was fired from the patrol boats and rubber boats. They burst in midair and produced a great quantity of bubbles. That region of ocean was covered by a ceiling of white bubbles. The entire fleet had likely been hidden from any satellites.

And a storm of laser beams did not hesitate to tear through it all like a downpour of light.

“Gyaaaaaaahhh!!”

Heivia covered his head with his hands and cowered down on the deck of the patrol boat.

The laser beams arrived dozens at a time and with only a few seconds in between waves. But none of them hit the patrol boat Quenser’s group used to navigate the bubbly sea. When the light hit the violently expelled bubbles, it was reflected randomly.

They had only managed this countermeasure because the Old Fashion was an old First Generation and because they had so much data on it.

And the older the Object, the more likely it was to prefer laser beams as an anti-air defense for nuclear missiles and the like. It was almost more a matter of faith than anything. It could have used railguns or some other method, but it chose lasers. Finding a solution had not been all that difficult.

But that did not mean they could rest easy. They could not see the lasers. The orange lines were only the afterimages of dust and

moisture being burned. They only saw the result after the fact. They were repeatedly experiencing the same fear as cutting down some normal-looking grass only to find a landmine and realizing how close they had come to stepping on it. Of course their balls were going to shrivel up.

They heard an explosion from beyond the bubbles.

One of the boats had apparently been unlucky enough to be blown away by one of the reflected laser beams.

And the rest had no guarantee the same would not happen to them.

“Oh, god! Oh, god!! Urp, oh god is this scary!!”

“If you have time to scream and sob, then get working, Heivia! We need to drop our cargo!!”

Quenser kicked Heivia’s back as the boy curled up and wept and then he worked with the other soldiers to push something attached to a thick metal wire over the patrol boat’s railing. It was quite heavy and it sank instead of floating.

Meanwhile, the laser beams continued pouring down.

Someone must not have been able to stand it anymore because they shouted over the radio.

“This is Mermaid 9! We’re at our limit! The soap chaff isn’t enough to stop the laser beams. Preparing Plan 2! Emitting polarized smokescreen!!”

“You goddamn idiot!!” shouted back Quenser.

But before he even finished, some unnaturally colorful smoke rose from one corner of the bubbly sea. It was a blinding smokescreen. By scattering the light, it would deflect the laser beams, but…

“Wah…”

All the bubbles in that area vanished as soon as the smokescreen appeared. The fine powder and the bubble film collided, popping all of the bubbles in turn.

At the same time, the fine powder forming the smokescreen was caught in the liquid forming the popped bubbles.

So what happened?

They created a nice blank space with no defenses whatsoever.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

A blinding light revealed the result.

Heivia clung to the patrol boat’s railing with both hands.

“This is bad. We have no idea where the lightning is going to strike and the soap chaff and smokescreen don’t mix. As more ships are hit and scatter black smoke, our dubious shield is going to be filled with holes!!”

“If there was a perfect defense, Objects never would have ended the nuclear age. No matter what we might do, the Objects still have an unfair advantage. That’s just the age we live in! You knew that, didn’t you!?”

As they shouted back and forth, most of the ships dropped their cargo. There were quite a few sacrifices, but they used the time that bought them to make progress.

Beyond the bubbles, the Baby Magnum and Old Fashion were firing back and forth at close range. That strongest Elite was truly frightening. He moved around like a mixed martial artist, but also maintained his position behind the Princess to use her as a shield against the Rush who was constantly trying to target him with her Gatling cannons.

He made it look easy.

The Baby Magnum and the Rush would both have been outmatched while fighting alone and his pace did not falter even when facing them both at once.

Also, the Old Fashion used more than just its main cannon, which was a compressed metal cannon with an ultra small caliber barrel that used both a normal magazine and a drum magazine.

Again and again, sharp sounds of cannon fire burst from something like a boxy metal container on the opposite side.

The Princess continually shot down what it was firing.

“What are those? Missiles!?”

These were nothing like the shoulder-fired ones meant to shoot down fighters. They were a much more overwhelming sight and they looked like a nationally-funded rocket tilted on its side.

“It might be more accurate to call them reverse-thrust rockets,” clarified the Princess. “They attach themselves with instant glue and then fire against my wishes to rob me of my mobility.”

The Baby Magnum was covered in weapons meant for use against nuclear missiles. She did not even need to use her naval floats to dodge. Even with those rockets constantly fired from less than 100 meters away, not even one could slip through her interception barrage. But using her mental resources on that could easily lead to falling behind in the direct battle between Objects.

The Old Fashion was not especially fast, its main cannon was not especially powerful, and its armor was not especially thick.

And yet no one could defeat him.

No one could keep up with his thoughts and no one could damage his Object.

“It’s like a miracle, Faith Organization!!”

“Then we just have to rob him of that mystical movement of his!!”

After that shout, Quenser sent a signal via radio.

Everyone had been waiting for it, so they all responded immediately.

And then “that” happened.

Part 5

The Old Fashion kept afloat with air cushions.

It emitted massive amounts of air toward the surface below it and gained lift by allowing that air to accumulate between the two-by-two arrangement of floats and the ocean surface.

The system was well known for being broadly adaptable to changes in the terrain. A flat surface was of course best, but a bumpy wasteland was not much of a problem.

However, that only went so far.

If the ground was made of a lattice like chain-link or a birdcage, the air cushion would not work. The air would escape downwards and fail to provide enough lift.

Quenser and the others had done the same thing.

They used steel beams.

For as far as the eye could see, steel beams jutted vertically up from the ocean surface like this was an asparagus farm.

They were basically a type of buoy. They were a lot like a larger version of a fishing float. A ball-shaped float made of a foam material was attached around the steel beam, a thick wire was attached, and they sank to the bottom of the ocean. The wire could be cut with a remote signal, freeing the giant buoy so its buoyancy could carry it to the surface.

A large quantity of needle-like protrusions was another terrain air cushions had trouble with.

No matter how much air they released, it would not remain atop the needles. The Object was kept afloat in relation to the ocean surface, so its floats would contact the steel “needles”.

A normal hovercraft would have its skirt torn and it would sink, but a nuke-resistant Object would not be so easily defeated. It would force its way through by pushing the steel beams back down below the surface.

But the top of the beams tearing at it from below was sure to lower its speed.

That First Generation was not especially fast, not especially destructive, and not especially well-protected. Pulling at its feet would help tear down its undefeated legend.

“I see…!!”

A voice reached them from the Old Fashion. He sounded more

excited than afraid or angry.

“Wait, wait, wait! Ho…oh ho ho. I use an air cushion too, so won’t this affect me as well!?”

“Yeahhh, but you’re an enemy Elite, so we didn’t really worry about you too much.”

“You monster! Do I have to start reminding you I have basic rights as a human being!?”

They heard the blast of metal being melted and blown away.

From her safe zone a short distance away, the Baby Magnum’s low-stability plasma cannon had finally torn away one edge of the Old Fashion’s spherical main body. It was far from a clean hit, but it was still a valuable first step. This was no longer a one-sided battle and they were no longer helpless.

With its mobility taken, a grinding sound came from below the Old Fashion, but the Elite still forcibly moved the Object around. As he did, large waves formed which nearly capsized Quenser’s patrol boat once they arrived.

“What a stubborn son of a bitch!! How perfect a pilot is he, dammit!?”

“Wait a second…”

Quenser said something strange.

Something else changed as they watched. The Old Fashion was not just fleeing randomly. There was a pattern to the waves he was creating. And they interfered with the buoys floating in the ocean like giant steel needles. In fact, it looked like he was neatly guiding them so they gathered in a single place!

And why he was doing so became abundantly clear a moment later.

He climbed up on top of the mountain of needles he had created.

“Wha-?”

Quenser and the others had interfered with his air cushions because the sharp and evenly-spaced steel beams prevented the compressed air from building up. That should have caused the bottom of the Old Fashion to hit the steel beams which would lower his speed.

But Robert Mistynail had taken the opposite tack.

By gathering the scattered beams in a single place and pressing them together, he had filled in the gaps. It was like a brand-new straw container that was packed full. That prevented the air cushion's air from escaping. Just like a tanker in a shipyard with its great weight distributed over many pillars, the Old Fashion could climb up onto the needles like it was traveling across land!

The Baby Magnum was slow to react to this unexpected freedom of movement.

That lag was less than a second, but it was enough for her armor to be torn apart.

A burning spear burst out from the cross that decorated the tip of the Old Fashion's main cannon. That was the muzzle flash. That compressed metal cannon with an ultra small caliber barrel truly was like a needle and it targeted the Baby Magnum's spherical main body. The left side of her armor opened up like a flower around that central point and three of the seven main cannons were torn away at once.

"The Baby Magnum was damaged!! I can continue fighting, but the partially-remaining armor will increase my air resis-…!!"

Quenser's group did not have time to listen through to the end of their ally's report.

One of the Old Fashion's intermittently-fired laser beam attacks had hit the ocean nearby. It must have reacted to the bubbles or the smokescreen because it triggered an explosion of steam.

The impact from the side capsized the patrol boat.

"Goddammit!!"

Quenser frantically tried to grab onto something, but Heivia kicked his hand away. Clinging to the sinking ship would only get him dragged down to the bottom of the ocean.

They were all thrown out into the midsummer Mediterranean.

"This is the worst vacation ever…"

"Pwah. But it's not over yet." Quenser grinned while soaking wet.

“Did you think you’d won once you crossed the asparagus farm, Old Fashion? Here it comes!!”

A moment later, something hit the Old Fashion from directly below and the Object floated up from the ocean a little.

Part 6

Second Venice was a giant artificial island.

It looked like a floating city 20 km across, but it was actually made by combining giant dice made of aluminum alloy or reinforced stainless steel. The air inside those was used to keep the entire city afloat. They were basically giant metal beach balls.

They naturally could not allow water in, but destroying the connection between dice was also a bad idea. To ensure the safety of Second Venice, a set number of spares had to be preserved at all times.

They had borrowed those.

They had borrowed them and used submarines to drag them down to the bottom of the ocean. The rest was no different from the previous asparagus farm. They had cut the wires and allowed the air inside to pull them up.

“Ah.”

The Old Fashion floated up into the air.

It weighed 200,000 tons, which was twice that of an outdated nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. That frightening weight was pushed up just a bit by the float used to support an entire city.

And even an Object could not accelerate or turn while on unsteady footing. When performing a long jump, it was impossible to change direction after leaving the ground.

“Phew…”

The Princess breathed a slow sigh of relief.

Her low-stability plasma cannon burst out. This time she made full use of the few seconds of opportunity by targeting the very center of the Old Fashion's main body.

But even after that…

"You're…kidding!" shouted Heivia.

The Old Fashion had not been destroyed. It had aimed its main cannon and all of its secondary cannons downwards to blow away the giant piece of artificial land that had knocked it into the air. And the intense shockwave slightly changed the Old Fashion's own path through the air. That allowed it to just barely avoid the Princess's low-stability plasma cannon. Most of its armor turned orange and tore away, but the reactor and cockpit escaped unharmed.

"You damn genius!!" groaned Oh Ho Ho.

The badly-damaged Old Fashion landed in the ocean rather than the land made of aluminum and stainless steel. Great waves spread in every direction. The float arrived right in front of Quenser and Heivia. In only a dozen or so seconds, they would be tossed around.

But Quenser did not care.

The ocean was filthy. There were boats, wreckage, buoys made from steel beams, and the dice-shaped pieces of the float drifting around. The student grabbed a piece of equipment from their patrol boat that he spotted among it all.

It was a wire shooter that used pressurized gas to fire a metal hook.

It was part of a winch used to drag around a captured enemy ship.

"The float wasn't just to throw you into the air."

He ignored the approaching wave and grabbed onto the float. He attached the edge of the wire shooter device onto the latch of the joint holding the dice together.

"We don't even have to break through your armor to defeat you."

Then he looked up at his giant foe.

He rested the wire shooter on his shoulder and took aim.

“Even an Object will sink if it capsizes!!”

With the sound of compressed air escaping, the metal hook shot out.

He was lucky the Object’s own massive shockwave had forcibly altered its trajectory. That had prevented it from using its secondary cannons to shoot down the metal hook with an anti-air laser.

Then the wire attached itself by wrapping around the main cannon.

The giant spare float was attached to the Object by a wire.

It happened just as the Object regained its balance and swung itself around to aim at the Baby Magnum from the side.



The Old Fashion was already unstable, but then the wire and spare float tugged at it. It was like a horse being dragged around by a rope caught on its neck. The Object rocked and tilted. The air cushion engine blew a massive amount of air downwards to create a layer of air between the float and the ocean. If the float itself flipped upside down, the Object could no longer remain afloat. The 200,000 ton mass would simply sink.

“Sink.”

As the Old Fashion wobbled, Quenser raised what sounded like a prayer.

“Sink already, ace!!”

But then he heard the sharp sound of the thick wire snapping. Even if it was made to drag around captured ships, it had been unable to bear the Object’s weight.

Quenser glared at his powerful enemy even as the wire flipped back like a serpent and nearly took off his head.

A moment later, a further impact arrived from the side.

It was the Baby Magnum.

And the Rush.

This went beyond a volley of main cannons or secondary cannons. They used their full speed to charge in and ram their Objects against the Old Fashion as it tried to regain its balance.

“It’s time you gave up that position for someone else, ace.”

“Oh ho ho. How about you rest in peace, you ghost!?”

That clinched it.

The Faith Organization legend flipped over and sunk. The two-by-two arrangement of floats writhed about and blew air out, but they accomplished nothing while not in contact with the ground or ocean.

“He didn’t eject,” noted Quenser as he drifted in the ocean.

“Well, he flipped upside down. The water may have gotten in the way and kept the emergency exit from opening.”

“…”

Quenser could not agree with Heivia’s suggestion.

That ace had stuck with that old Object for a promise with an old friend. Quenser suspected the man had never had an ejection device installed in the first place.

External Document – Concerning Catherine Blueangel

This is a report concerning the requested matter.

Catherine Blueangel was exposed to a deadly mold carrying Argeiphontes, but the antidote has proven effective and she is recovering. No after effects have been noted, so there should be nothing to worry about there.

The results of the counseling session with a military doctor are less promising.

Catherine is still highly dependent on firearms and it would be difficult to send her to a safe country at the moment. And even if she is a special case due to being former Councilor Flide's pawn, she is still a Pilot Elite who was developed using plenty of Legitimacy Kingdom technology. Even if she is given a new identity through a witness protection program, there is still a threat of foreign agents abducting her or retrieving information from her. It would be best to view her life in a safe country as a pipedream.

As for the incident in Second Venice, that only proved Catherine's skill in combat. Placing an Elite before enemy soldiers would be truly foolish, but she could be sent to a military research institute or a training facility to analyze her combat methods for use by normal soldiers.

This will mean sending Catherine back to an institution after briefly releasing her from that life, but if we think of it as a service to her country, then there is no reason to stop it. She will only gain more medals to wear on her chest, so she might even welcome the chance.

An Elite can only live as an Elite.

Besides, the Civilian Acclimation Assistance System has always been set up so we can determine who passes. It is specifically designed to prevent skilled Elites from retiring at their own discretion. Catherine's may have been a somewhat unique case, but since she is an Elite, we will have her live as an Elite until she enters her grave.

Epilogue

The fleet that acted as an Information Alliance base was buzzing with activity.

They had taken the dirty job of establishing an indiscriminate quarantine to save the world, but that had been entirely overturned and they were on the verge of being viewed as mere villains. They were carrying out a great variety of information manipulation both in public and in secret. A mistake here could erase the future of their Pilot Elite.

While all that was going on, some engineers had arrived in secret using a small submersible so they could not be detected via satellite.

“Dullahan, huh?”

Lendy Farolito, the commander with long silver hair and brown skin, spoke the group’s name.

This was a front line battlefield, but every last one of them wore a suit and tie and their hair was perfectly parted. Simply breathing brought the scent of cheap hair gel to her nose. That was suicidal because they would be detected from 500 meters away if trying to hide in a dark forest.

The military office workers grinned cheerfully and made a suggestion.

“Please leave the rest to us, lieutenant colonel. We have heard the Gatling 033 was recently hit by a cyber-attack by the enemy Coilgun 052, but we will inspect and defrag the system. There is nothing to worry about.”

“You’re going to touch Juliet? On whose authority?”

“We cannot leave any possibility of the Strategic AI having been infected, can we? We must clean it up. Would you like to check the electronic document temporarily granting us S-level access? …Or should I say the electronic document we forged in real time?”

“…”

“There is nothing to worry about, lieutenant colonel. When you have no way of determining the veracity of information, it can be as easily true as it can be false. It is much like arguing which is the outer side on a Mobius strip.”

“Do you intend to use this as a pretext to alter the black box within the Object?”

That was the greatest taboo. The black box recorded all actions and transmissions during battle, so it was something like the document that proved they had not lost control of a soldier on the battlefield. Altering that was the same as being able to do whatever one wanted without consequences.

But the office workers viewed war from a different angle and did not see it as quite so important.

The leader immediately answered with his usual flat smile.

“If you would like. That is a common request on the battlefields we visit, so feel free. Even this is a popularity contest.”

“I see.”

It was true that they would prefer there were no records of this battle. Assuming things did not get too bad, they could always weasel out of any demands to release the information, but it was always possible things would get “too bad”.

She thought about her cute Elite and what would be best for that girl.

“Either way, we will cooperate with you, Dullahan. The Information Alliance as a whole needs that girl to remain in the cockpit.”

“Of course.”

“But let’s not alter that black box. This crime will never be made public, but it seems that girl does not intend to forget it happened.”

“For better or for worse, we simply comply with the requests we are given, but I will ask for your sake. Lieutenant colonel, are you insane?”

“Please. This is a request from that girl.”

The man with perfectly parted hair sighed just once.

He erased his smile before answering.

“You leave us with no choice. Resolving this under those conditions will require great risk for both of us…but it has been a while since I ran across such an exciting challenge.”

Catherine Blueangel got up from her small medical bed.

“Oh? Are you feeling better?” asked the old maintenance lady.

Catherine had not been with the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion for long, but she knew the woman. Her name was Ayami Cherryblossom and she had helped Catherine with the stamps ‘Cook a meal’ and ‘Give one of your elders a shoulder massage’.

“Granny…? But why?”

“As long as you’re feeling better, nothing else matters. Frolaytia asked me to look after you while Quenser is away, so you can really tell how much of a kid she still is. …Yet if I stay with you for too long, the Princess will get upset.”

The old maintenance lady sighed and shook her head.

Catherine tilted her head.

“Can I go outside now?”

“If you’re feeling up to it. Don’t worry about the Argeiphontes. If there was a problem there, you wouldn’t have been taken out of isolation.”

Catherine’s face lit up and she placed her feet on the floor.

“Oh, yeah. I’d gotten all my stamps.”

“Oh, well done.”

“Heh heh heh! Now I can go to a safe country!! I need to ask Frolaytia about it. I want to go to Paris and see the scenery my big brother saw!!”

The old maintenance lady sighed as she watched Catherine run out of the medical room.

It was too heavy a sigh to be of relief.

“Well, I do understand how Frolaytia feels. This is just too much to bear.”

With the low humidity, the summer sun was hot and dry.

The cool sea breeze washed over Frolaytia Capistrano as she lay in a beach chair while wearing a bikini.

She was on the roof of a building on the south side. The small drink table next to the villa pool had a laptop on it. The video chat window showed a man on the border between young and middle aged and he cleared his throat

“Major Capistrano, that is a tad risqué.”

“Captain, I am trying to work off all the stress the military has given me. …This was supposed to be a simple job even an older Object could handle, but just look what we found. And the worst part is that my men believe this was my decision.”

“Major, this conversation is being monitored.”

She ignored him.

As the busty silver-haired base commander lay on the beach chair, the laptop desperately continued speaking as if to put her back in a good mood.

“I-I hear Second Venice will be returned to the Information Alliance.”

“What else could we do after all this damage? Trying to repair it could easily put us in debt and who knows if we could make that money back by reopening it as a tourist destination. Especially with the stories about it being an infection base. We need to shove it back into the Information Alliance’s hands. Repair it or abandon it, it’s clearly going to cause massive financial damage.”

Race, ideology, resources, and territory. A lot was weighed on the scales when it came to wars, but in this age, the most popular factor was money. From that perspective, handing back a useless tourist resource to drag your enemy into debt was not a bad decision.

But the man on the laptop had more to say.

“Some suspect that they were waiting for this.”

“You mean they secretly drove the Faith Organization to attack so they could take Second Venice back from us? Not a chance. A plan on that scale takes a lot of time, so the timing doesn’t work. Not to mention that their tourist resource is in shambles, their secret infection base was revealed to the world, and they torpedoed the Rush’s diplomatic image by using her for the quarantine. The city isn’t worth taking back.”

“Then?”

“Didn’t I tell you? The Information Alliance was badly burned by all this, so they’re working hard to spread nonsense in an attempt to dilute the truth. Don’t get all worked up over every conspiracy theory you see on a message board, captain. This was an absolute victory for us, so I recommend sitting back with a nice drink and watching them flounder. Oh, how I loathe them.”

That said, the Information Alliance was not about to collapse.

Second Venice was indeed partially destroyed. And the negative image of the infection base meant a great amount of effort and funding would be needed to bring it back as a tourist resource.

But at the same time, economies were interconnected. The infection base image had apparently led to antibacterial sprays and sheets selling even better than before back in the safe countries. That just left the usual pooling and laundering of money. The money made by the antibacterial industry would be secretly sent to the infection base to heal the burn as quickly as possible. The Information Alliance was the world power that publicly announced it was ruled by the winners of digital expansion whether they were good or evil, kind or unkind, innocent or guilty. Something like this was nothing to them.

Whether it continued at Second Venice or not, they would repeat something similar at some other international tourist destination. They already had the data showing them the extreme medical expenses their countries had to pay because the people were visiting their doctors so often thanks to the antibacterial craze weakening their immunity. With that data in hand, they could not just ignore the problem.

“Well, that’s more or less what tourist destinations are. They invite people in from outside and influence them with their culture. It can be people, money, information, ideologies, or aesthetics, but that’s where it is all exchanged. It only got so complicated this time because immunology got thrown into the mix.”

“What do you think about the infection base, major?”

“It’s neither good nor bad. Besides, the Legitimacy Kingdom nobles love their wine and cheese to death, so they tend to get along well with microbes. We need some contact with germs and bacteria, but it all comes down to how you do it. Instead of being sneaky about it, maybe they should have manufactured some major fad. Call it edible health or a drinkable diet and they could sell the germs that have been floating around for millennia as a new kind of yogurt. … And since this is the Information Alliance we’re talking about, they could get the entire world behind it by slapping on a sticker saying its popular in New York.”

Why had they not done that?

They had talked about protecting their people’s health and reducing international medical costs, but it likely came down to authority and territory. Had someone not wanted to use the food industry? Or had someone wanted an excuse to maintain a method of disseminating a deadly virus, just like remaking a rocket launch base into a missile launch base?

“We’re the same, captain.”

“?”

“Is there really any reason for modern warms to take this form? Just like that infection base, it might be the result of someone twisting things to increase their authority. …Not that pieces on the game board like us would be able to tell.”

Frolaytia rolled over as if sulking, but the topic of conversation may not have mattered much. Anyone could have noticed her mind was elsewhere.

She placed her kiseru back in her mouth as she continued.

“Those safe country money-lovers who have never set foot on the battlefield can all go straight to hell for placing Catherine’s future on the scales for their own amusement.”

More and more large transport ships arrived at the port.

There were too many for them all to fit at the docks, so some of them lowered their anchors nearby and used small boats to ferry the supplies over.

Quenser and Heivia discussed the situation while assembling a battery-powered lighthouse on a piece of Second Venice's north side that jutted out.

"Wow, there's more Information Alliance ships than anything."

"Well, they're desperate to improve their image. Switch on your radio and you'll hear more of Oh Ho Ho's sweet voice than you ever wanted. She's apparently going to hold a charity concert in a safe country with all proceeds going to restoring Second Venice."

"Will that actually work? Second Venice was full of VIPs and wealthy people from around the world, right? I don't know what industries are needed to raise up an idol, but won't the people at the top be less than pleased with her?"

"There are some frightening rumors about that. Those wealthy people never actually went out into the ocean, right? Well, even if it's revealed that the Information Alliance was behind the blockade, they can apparently obscure which Object it was. They're apparently creating the data for an entirely fictional Object and Elite so they can place all the blame on that. They're using some kind of information safety device that's called the Dullahan Protection because they digitally swap out the head. Of course, we are talking about the Information Alliance. That rumor might just be a bluff to hide some even deeper secret."

"Are you serious…? Even if it had military encryption, we were talking over the radio like crazy. And the silhouette had to have been visible from the coast. An amateur radio enthusiast or a birdwatcher could sink that plan."

"They're blaming it all on some younger Elite that looked up to Oh Ho Ho. And of course, that Elite only exists as a 15-digit social security number. If the rumors are correct, that is."

"Damn that's scary."

“Yeah, you’ve gotta hand it to the Information Alliance. Not many people can tell a search engine’s trending words what to do. I really don’t want to see the moment when history is made. My balls will shrivel up.”

Even as they spoke, they had no intention of ending their solemn mood.

“Well, let’s just look at this as having an idol’s secret all to ourselves.”

“Oh, I like the sound of that. That’s another trophy for my life.”

That was when a simultaneous beep came from their pockets. It was their handheld devices. They pulled them out and saw a business-like email from Frolaytia. The information would normally not have been released to them, but she likely felt obligated to the soldiers who had participated in this mission.

Yes, they were faced with another problem besides the disaster recovery(?) for Second Venice.

“So they really did fail Catherine,” muttered Heivia, sounding disgusted.

The Civilian Acclimation Assistance System allowed a Pilot Elite to leave that path and live in a safe country rather than a battlefield country. Their mission had been to see Catherine Blueangel through to the end of that. Simply put, they were to see whether or not Catherine’s small hand could forget the feeling of a gun.

But she had been too useful.

Without her, it was doubtful they could have overcome the challenges at Second Venice. Quenser would have lost his life, the deadly mold would have spread across the globe, and the experiment to create a “miracle human” would have begun in earnest, even if success was highly doubtful.

She definitely deserved praise for what she had done.

She deserved to wear an official medal on her chest for her actions.

But that was a battlefield honor. The more she had done, the further she had strayed from being a normal civilian.

Winning a gold medal at an international piano or ballet competition was not always a good thing for the winner. That would sometimes restrict their life. That might sound like a first world problem, but when it came to deadly wars, it was a much more serious issue.

Quenser sighed.

“It sounds like it’s a lot harder for her since she doesn’t have any parents. Since she’s all alone, the hurdle is apparently twice as high. It sounds like things would have been different if she had someone to take her in who could stop her if it came to it, but the only people stepping forward are agents for the government. They just want to send her to the military or a lab and rob her of her freedom while using their authority as her parent.”

“That’s a lot of ‘sounds like’ and ‘apparently’ and I don’t care if you don’t have anything to back it up! What’s really going to happen to Catherine? It’ll take years before they can finish a successor to the Exact Javelin. And since that was that Flide bastard’s personal Object, who knows if there’s even a division left to continue the research.”

“In that case, they might see her results here and use her as a saboteur. Or maybe they’ll attach a ton of electrodes to her head in a lab to get as much information out of her as they can.”

“Those are all terrible options. Catherine risked her life to save 100,000 people and anyone could tell she’s not a serial killer, so why does that mean she can’t leave the path of killing?”

“That’s why I won’t let that happen.”

“What?”

“Weren’t you listening? The hurdle is a lot lower if she has someone to take her in. And do you remember the role I was given for this mission? …I’m Catherine Blueangel’s big brother.”

External Document – A Father and Son’s Phone Record

“Hi, daddy.”

“Oh, Quenser? What’s with the international call from the battlefield? Should you really be spending so much just because the government is paying you?”

“Don’t worry. This is a collect call on a satellite phone, so it’s all on you.”

“That’s a triple punch! Can I hang up right this instant? How much does ten seconds cost!?”

“Now, now, now. I don’t call home often, so you should know your cute son is in a bit of a bind. I’d like some of my daddy’s wisdom.”

“Nothing good has ever happened when my wife starts speaking sweetly or when you start calling me daddy. And you even threatened me with the phone bill to keep me from thinking about it for too long. But this is at least something a safe country office worker can do, right?”

“It’s simple.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. So what exactly do you need?”

“Sure. Daddy, I want a little sister.”

“Bfhhhh!!!?? C-cough, cough! U-um, Quenser? You’re not a child anymore, so surely you know babies aren’t gift-wrapped and delivered by Santa Claus. I don’t know what movie has influenced you, but you have to think about the burden on your parents’ bodies.”

“No, no. Not that. I’m talking about a step-sister.”

“Really, what movies have you been watching, you brat!? And that isn’t easy either!!”

“C’mon, don’t be like that. The girl’s the one in trouble, not me. Remember when you sheltered that disagreeable noble named Monica in our food storehouse when her family fell into ruin? Can’t you help out this girl like that?”

“…”

“Daddy? D-dad?”

“Let me ask one thing. I’m sure this has to do with the military, so you can leave out the details. Just give me the final answer. …Is that girl really in trouble? Like with Monica, is she in immediate danger if we don’t reach out a helping hand?”

……

“W-well, let’s just say this is even worse than with Moni-…”

“Then I don’t care if it means picking a fight with the entire world. Bring that girl here at Mach speed. And I mean right now.”

Afterword

And with that, Heavy Object reaches its 12th volume.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Damn, this afterword made me realize the arrival of the 10th volume passed me right by. But since the 1st volume is a starter pack and the rest are booster packs you can start reading from anywhere, maybe that's how it should be.

This time, I focused on military jobs besides gunfights. That was mainly disaster relief and disease prevention. Then again, maybe Quenser and the others were working against that when they left and reentered the quarantine zone.

And as I suggested in the afterword to Vanilla-Flavored Chemical Formula, I used some of the old characters and concepts to build up a stronger foundation. I would like for all of you readers to decide what you thought of that different way of doing things.

People's immunity weakening due to the proliferation of antibacterial goods, skyrocketing medical costs, an infection base made into a global tourist destination, and a plan to strengthen people's immunity by spreading germs… I always focus on going all out with the craziness in Heavy Object more than my other series, but what did you think of the flavoring of this one? Let us hope that there was not a shred of realism to it. I am praying that we live in an age that can laugh this off as ridiculous.

The Objects this time were the Rush and two one-off ones.

The Lizard Tail had the same self-destructive protection technology as a car given an intentionally weak structure so it can destroy itself and protect the driver. It was also a Zombie Object that could take control of the enemy Object with a cyber-attack. I was trying to combine it with the image of the infection base hidden in Second Venice (even if one belonged to the Faith Organization and the other to the Information Alliance). When you have a secret military facility and microbe research, it's gotta be zombies, right? I think I really made a strange Object here. It was an undead soldier that would return no matter how many times it was shot down. I also think I made a different sort of Elite for it. By the way, the runner

up idea was an Object that devoured other Objects with metal-eating bacteria.

The even more bizarre Object was the Old Fashion. To keep a promise with an old friend, that one fought the flow of time to continue his love of the old Object while also continuing to reign as the strongest. Now that is an Object just brimming with romance. You can probably tell if you compare them, but this was the polar opposite of the undead soldier. I made it an ace that had never lost. Personal circumstances trumping the organization should never happen in the military, but that may be what makes it so romantic.

Catherine was similar to Putana and Mariydi in her ability to fight directly, but I tried to differentiate her with her inability to find her own reason to fight. She was even more mechanical than a mercenary. Due to being Flide's pawn, she fights by being "booted up" in combat mode and does not question the justification given to her. That is why I think you can feel her own will breaking free of the chains of justification when she hands over her gas mask to protect Quenser. (From a purely combat perspective, Catherine's survival would be more important than Quenser's.) She is the girl who wants to leave hell but cannot cut herself free of war so easily. I hope you were able to accept her.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Nagi Ryou-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. With the container yard mission where the containers were moved around like a crane game, the vertical tower defense mission on the broadcast tower, the underground facility mission with changing water level, etc., I was focusing more on video games than B-movies for these battlefields, but I doubt representing those locations was easy. Writing it out in text is simple enough, but drawing them in illustrations has to be entirely different. Thank you for sticking with me this time too.

I also give my thanks to the readers. With Second Venice and Councilor Flide's pawn Elite, I tried focusing from the very beginning on what I had built up in the previous volumes (and in the other media like the manga and anime). I thought that might open up some new possibilities, but I will leave it to you to judge. Thank you very much once again.

And I will end this here.

I hope this book will remain in your heart in some way.

I have a habit of making the protagonist's dads really cool…

-Kamachi Kazuma

Notes

1. ↑ [Trivia] In fact, that's wrong. Gabriel has always been depicted as male (sometimes fair-faced or based on human women but still intended as male), while the only angel depicted clearly as female is Laylah, Angel of Conception.

Heavy Object - Volume 12

The Smallest War — *0.01mm War*

Author: **Kamachi Kazuma**

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